

# Children of the Good



Jack Preston King

*Children of the Good*

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## **What *Children of the Good* Is, and What It Isn't - A Brief Introduction**

For several years in the early 2010s, I was a practicing Catholic. It was my second slow-dance with Catholic devotion (you can read about my first time on the dancefloor [here](#)), and during those years I decided to make a go of it as “a Catholic writer.” I adopted the pseudonym Felix Whelan – “Felix,” being Greek for “happy,” and “whelan” being Welsh for “joy.” So “Felix Whelan” equals “Happy Joy.” It was a conscious incantation, a spell designed to manifest a successful writer’s life of happy joy.

*Children of the Good* was my Magnum Opus as Felix Whelan. It’s Book One of a planned trilogy (don’t worry, *Children of the Good* is a complete story unto itself - think *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*), but I only got a few chapters into writing Book Two before the lack of Book One sales stole my motivation. I eventually unpublished *Children of the Good* and moved on to other projects.

*Children of the Good* got early rave reviews from a number of Catholic book bloggers. But there was this one negative review that really got to me. In words like an angry fist pounding a table, he (of course my critic was a *he*) pronounced that my little book was an affront to Catholic theology. His main concern was

that my story at least appeared to be setting up Christ's return at the Second Coming *as a girl*.

Which is true. He was not misreading *Children of the Good*. That's what I was writing, and writing well, IMHO. What shocked me was that he had a problem with it.

He was adamant that the Salvation of Humanity, from a Catholic perspective, pivoted on the shape of God's genitalia.

Sexist pig.

I might have shrugged him off as a misogynistic zealot, but his words moved me to do some research, instead. He'd supported his argument with references to the Catechism and Papal documents, so I looked them up.

My angry critic was right. Official Catholic theology is remarkably sexist.

And *Children of the Good* colors so far outside those lines that, from a Traditional point of view, it probably *is* an affront to Catholic theology.

Let that be a warning or an incentive, as the spirit moves you.

**What Children of the Good Is, and What It Isn't**



It is not my intention to bash Catholicism, a faith from which, for the second time in my life, I have successfully parted company with no hard feelings.

Suffice it to say that *Children of the Good* is not “a Catholic novel.”

Rather, *Children of the Good* is a fast-paced spiritual SciFi/Fantasy novel that traffics in certain aspects of Catholic mythology the way Lord of the Rings mined Norse myth without simply retelling it.

*Children of the Good* is set in a dystopian near future (2066) in which all religion has been outlawed. The mythology driving the spiritual part of the story is Catholic, as I personally experienced Catholicism before awakening to its inherent misogyny.

My personal Catholicism of the 2010s had a lot more to do with Marian apparitions than with the Catechism or Papal documents (or Jesus, for that matter). So *Children of the Good* is a novel steeped in Marian apparitions and miracles. The Blessed Virgin Mary, here referred to only as *the woman*, is a bad-ass supernatural superhero with the power to knock the Antichrist on his ass.

Yeah, the Antichrist is here, too. Catholics don't spend much time worrying about the “Man of Perdition.” That's mostly a Protestant obsession. For the End Times mythology in *Children of the Good*, I

tapped my 1970s Methodist upbringing, where we gave ourselves shivers reading Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* in Sunday school and seeing the devil in every headline.

*Children of the Good* is a weird mix and a wild ride. I should have marketed it to SciFi/Fantasy readers instead of Catholics from the start...

### **Read *Children of the Good* FREE!**

But that's water under the bridge. Who I really want to market this story to as we enter the 2020s is *Hollywood*.

When writing *Children of the Good*, I envisioned every scene projected onto the Big Screen. I think you'll agree that this novel is written like a movie, and that's because, at every stage of its creation, I intended it to become one.

I invite you to read *Children of the Good* for free. All I ask in return is that you *tell people about this story*. Share with anyone who will listen that *Children of the Good* would make a great movie. Send free-read links to everyone you know, especially people in the movie industry (or TV, that would work). Contact information is in the book, and on my website, [JackPrestonKing.com](http://JackPrestonKing.com)

I still remember where Books Two and Three were headed, and I feel confident I could write them

quickly, should a studio decide to option the movie rights to *Children of the Good* and want more. Or I'd be happy to consult with studio writers to develop the rest of the story straight into a Big Screen franchise!

Yeah, the movie rights to *Children of the Good* are for sale.

But the book is free to read. Help me spread the word.  
Thanks!

# **Children of the Good**

*by Jack Preston King*

## Part I: The Children of the Good, 2050 – 2063

*For in secret the holy  
children of the good  
were offering sacrifice  
and carried out with one mind  
the divine institution, So that your  
holy ones should share alike  
the same blessings and dangers,  
once they had sung the  
ancestral hymns of praise.*

Wisdom 18: 9

New American Bible

## Chapter One: The Story

"Please state your name and your age."

Nine year old Anne Gold allowed herself a brief glimpse of each stern face lined up behind the Barrett County School Board meeting room table, but kept her head turning past them, until her eyes came to rest on her mother. Mom and Dad were seated in the gallery with the other parents, a glass wall separating them from where she sat before the board members. Even from a distance, Anne could see that her mother was crying.

"Anne," she answered, her voice a crackling whisper.  
"Anne Gold."

"Speak up, please."

The woman asking questions was a stranger to the little girl, as were all the School Board members. The only face inside the examination chamber Anne recognized belonged to Principal Rankin, and the sour expression he wore didn't grant her any comfort. Anne straightened to sit properly in the chair. She took a deep breath.

"Anne Gold," she stated clearly. "I'm nine. I'm in Mrs. Bollinger's fourth grade class."

"Yes, thank you, Anne," the lady examiner said. "My name is Miss Bray, and I'm a student counselor with the Barrett County Special School. Do you understand why you are here tonight?"

"I think so..."

"Let me explain," Miss Bray continued, cutting her off. "You are here for one reason only, Anne, and that is to tell this board the truth. Principal Rankin has presented evidence that you and your friends may have fallen in with trouble makers, the so-called *Children of the Good*. That's a forbidden club, Anne. It's against the rules to join. You know that, right?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"A lot of children wind up in my care at the Special School because of that club, Anne. You don't have to be one of them."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"I just need you to tell me the truth, then. Did you join the *Children of the Good*?"

"Yes, Ma'am." She was whispering again.

"Speak up, please."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Did you attend any meetings?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

A pen appeared in Miss Bray's hand. An open notebook lay on the table before her.

"Now this is important, Anne. If you answer my next question honestly and fully, you may yet go home with your parents tonight. You can sleep in your own bed and be safe. Wouldn't that be nice?"

"Yes, Ma'am." Anne squirmed against the hard, wooden chair.

"Very good," Miss Bray continued. "All you have to do now is tell me the name of every child who attended those meetings with you."

Anne began to cry and sweat at the same time. She looked again to her mother, and then back to Miss Bray. She pressed her teeth together so hard that she felt her little jaw pop.

"I'm sure we already know everyone's names," Miss Bray answered Anne's silence. "This isn't about telling on your friends, Anne. It's about proving you're not really a member of their club. I'm sure you only joined because everyone else did. Of course, you're not really a *believer*..."



The counselor paused, and her eyes narrowed. She laid the pen carefully inside the open notebook and folded her hands together.

"*Believers* get taken away from their families, Anne. *Believers* live with me at the Special School until they're not believers anymore. But you're not one of those, are you? I'm giving you one chance, right now, to set the record straight."

Anne gripped the edges of the chair with both hands. She did not speak.

"You don't have to share in your friends' punishment, Anne. Just give me their names. Do what's right for yourself."

Anne looked to her mother, and Miss Bray followed her eyes.

"Think of your mother, Anne. If you don't betray your friends this minute, you may never see her again. Do you want that?"

"No, Ma'am."

"Speak up, please."

"No, Ma'am!" *Oh, Mama...*

Miss Bray clapped her hands twice.

"Don't look at her. Look at me. This is your only chance, Anne. Speak the truth, right now, or suffer with your friends. It's them or you, Anne. Speak the truth. I'm waiting."

Anne looked back to Miss Bray, then down into her own lap. She could barely breathe, let alone speak. So she was as surprised as anyone when, from some hidden place inside her child's body, words like water rushing up from the bottom of a deep well rose to fill her mouth and flood out into the room.

"This is the truth," she said, all fear suddenly gone from her voice. She straightened once again in the chair, and took a deep breath. There was a large white clock with black hands on the far wall, just over the heads of Miss Bray and the school board members, and she fixed her eyes on it. She spoke her truth, then, and the words trilled out like a song:

*In the beginning,  
there was only the Good,  
and the Good made the world,  
and put all the people in it,  
and the world was good,  
and the people were good,  
and everyone was happy.*

*Then late one night,  
in the darkest dark of the night,  
while all the good people*

*in the whole world slept,  
the Evil fell like smoke  
from moonless treetops,  
and spread itself over the world,  
and the people breathed the smoke,  
and it crept inside their bodies.*

*And when they woke up,  
nobody was happy,  
and the Evil made the people  
be evil to each other,  
and think just about themselves,  
and forget about the Good,  
and send away their children.*

*But the Good is coming back...*

A loud *crack* as Miss Bray slammed the cover of the notebook on the table before her. Anne looked down, and the flow of words stopped.

"We're familiar with the story, Miss Gold," Miss Bray said. "You must be a very bright girl to have memorized every word like that."

The counselor turned toward the gallery, and the girl's parents, then swiveled back to face Anne.

"But the brightest children can do the stupidest things, sometimes. Your own words condemn you, Anne. There are no second chances."

Through the glass gallery window, Anne could see her mother sobbing hard against her father's chest. Dad held her, and stared back at Anne with eyes that were already seeing a ghost, his lips repeating a silent *why?*

Miss Bray extracted a sheet of pale, blue paper from a briefcase on the floor beside her chair, and signed it with a flourish. She stood and passed the form to the school board table behind her, where each board member in turn signed their name and passed the form on. When the *Warrant of Confinement to the Special School* returned to her hands, Miss Bray folded it carefully and filed it in her briefcase. Principal Rankin escorted Anne from the examination chamber to a small holding anteroom, then returned to his chair.

"Very well, then," Miss Bray announced. She opened the notebook again and smiled. "Who's next?"

## Chapter Two: The Grave

*Eight Years Later*

The sheep was dead. He could tell that much before he got close enough to touch it. Even a sleeping sheep's body expands and contracts as it breathes, and this sheep wasn't moving at all. There was an unnatural flatness to it that he guessed rationally was the fluids inside the sheep settling, but in his gut he felt the earth sucking the body down, hungry to make quick dirt of it.

Tomorrow, John Harper would be eighteen years old. Tomorrow, he would leave the Special School forever. He'd held on as a Gooder for most of eight years, but when the day came that he finally fell, he'd fallen hard. He'd taken fellow Gooder Anne Gold with him by getting her pregnant, and now she was dead and it was all his fault. The anger that never stopped churning inside him now had earned him praise from the School counselor, Miss Bray. Two weeks ago Sunday, he'd kicked bloody a nine year old caught blessing his lunch in a fit of crazy violence that told Superintendent Myer everything he needed to know.

John Harper was cured. He was ready for the real world.

But even with *Commandant Meyer* finally pleased with his progress, the school owned him for one more day and, as was the way of things at the Special School, even this final day would not pass without a *lesson* – or as the kids more plainly named it, without a beating.

Tomorrow, John Harper would graduate, with honors it seemed, at last from the Special School. Today, he would bury the sheep. Alone. The brutal August heat that felled the sheep burning his back, his only weapon against the drought-parched soil an old shovel.

When he got close enough to see the sheep's face, he felt nothing, and he knew in that moment the School had really broken him. The face was anything but serene in death, eyes panicked and bulging, a pink wad of bloody something from deep inside oozing out from a mouth bared and gaping as if still fighting for breath. It was a horrendous and pitiable sight. And John Harper didn't care. He knew not caring signaled a defect in the part of him normal feelings were supposed to come from, but even thinking that thought failed to stir the slightest change. He was dead inside.

\* \* \* \*

"This has been the best day of my life," Anne said, wistfully.

This was memory, not quite vision. This had really happened, this turning point.

May first was *Universal Self Day*, with speeches and parades, carnival rides and games. Once the sun set, there would be fireworks. Their dorm had come to the fairgrounds as a group, with no plans he knew of to hive off into couples, but the moment the rides started turning and rising and bellowing music, that's what happened. He spent the whole day with Anne, and it all somehow meant so much more than just an on-campus holiday, just friends hanging out. Now they were touching hands, timidly, facing one another as they sat cross-legged on the grass beneath a great, shading oak.

John Harper smiled and looked down at the grass poking up around his legs. They'd grown up together in the Special School, he and Anne, best friends from the fifth grade on, with never so much as a thought of anything more between them. Until today. Yesterday he'd have taken even kidding that he had a thing for Anne, or her for him, as an insult; today he couldn't take his eyes off her. Sitting this close, he did more than look. He caressed her with his eyes, memorizing her face, the shape of her neck, her slender arms, the barest freckling of her skin. Something dramatic had changed about Anne. Something new that he could not explain was moving inside him today, as well.

"Yeah," he said, "Me, too."

Before the fireworks, there would be a dance for the high school kids, so they returned to the empty dorm to change clothes. They should have gone to separate rooms till they were ready, met in the hallway to leave. They were both Gooders – they knew the right thing to do. But instead, John Harper changed quickly, then hurried to Anne’s room. As he stepped through the door, Anne was crossing from the bathroom, wearing only a towel. She stopped and smiled, and the thing churning all day in his insides turned him around and raised a hand to lock the door behind him.

When it was discovered that Anne was pregnant, the School cloistered her away to an all-girl dorm on the far side of campus. They said she wanted nothing to do with him. He’d ruined her life and she hated him. Don’t try to see her. Don’t call.

\* \* \* \*

He scratched a large square in the dirt in front of the sheep, five toe-to-heel footsteps on each side, and prepared to dig. But, when even jumping up and down on the shovel with all his weight failed to crack the parched surface, he threw down the shovel and walked back to the sheep shed. There was a long hose there used to give water to the sheep and other farm animals, and he stretched it to its length. He found another hose stored in the rafters of the shed and connected that one to the first. Now he could reach



the dead sheep. He laid the hose on the ground and let water flood the gravesite.

He was soon able to sink the shovel a good six inches into the mud, and he worked his way over the surface of the grave, removing the first half foot all the way across. He placed the hose in this shallow depression and let it fill to overflowing. When that water had sunk through and disappeared, he removed the next layer, four inches, maybe. Then the hose again, and this time the water seemed to take forever to be absorbed. He sat down cross-legged beside the dead sheep to wait.

\* \* \* \*

"You're not in trouble, Harper," Superintendent Meyer said as Miss Bray ushered him into the office, then stepped back out into the hallway and sealed them in. "Sit."

John Harper sat. He knew his body was sweating on the hard pasture ground beside the sheep, but his mind was before The Commandant.

"I'm sure you're curious about Miss Gold," Superintendent Meyer said. There was a massive wooden desk in the room, with a leather chair and a flag on a pole, but the Superintendent never sat. He moved back and forth in front of the boy as he spoke. "Don't worry, Harper. The School will take care of the

baby. Anne's parents are moving her to Springfield.  
To a girls-only School."

*"The baby...?"*

"We'll terminate the pregnancy before she moves on.  
No baby."

John Harper, seventeen years old, considered vomiting, but instead sat perfectly still, looking down at the floor. He could neither move nor speak. Silence meant his very real son or daughter, now a cluster of cells inside Anne's body, would be sacrificed for his sin. To speak, at best, might save the baby, but then Anne's life would be ruined, and who was he to decide that?

And what about him...? He was only seventeen...

He wanted to punch The Commandant's fat face, run away and never stop running.... Then a devil on his shoulder whispered *she hates you anyway...*

No baby. Not a father at seventeen. No consequences.

Relief and shame swirled together from his groin and rose to wrap his body in an ice cold blanket that bound without comforting. He told himself he was powerless before the decisions of The School, The Commandant, Anne's parents, but he knew these were lies. He wasn't in that moment sure exactly what he might have done to change things, but he knew

with unwavering certainty that, whatever it was, he wasn't going to do it. He was going to let this happen.

*For Anne...* he tried, briefly, though he knew the truth of it – *for himself*.

It was as if a light had gone out inside him. He couldn't even feel himself breathing.

"Can I go now?" was all he could think to say.

"Of course, John. Follow Miss Bray back to the dormitory. Don't do anything stupid."

\* \* \* \*

The muddy water had finally drained away, and he could now see the problem – the next layer of soil was packed with jagged sandstone in chunks ranging in size from tiny peas to a dinner plate. It was a shelf of buried stone he'd have to cut through by hand if he was going to keep digging in that spot. But if he moved and started over there was no guarantee the shelf wouldn't be waiting under the new location, as well. And even if he lucked out and got the grave dug elsewhere, the sheep weighed a hundred and fifty pounds easy, and he'd have to figure out how to drag it. If he finished where he started, he'd be able to just roll the sheep over and it would fall into the hole.

If he could make a hole. He scraped at the sandstone with the tip of the shovel and managed to scoop out a

layer of muddy soup like wet concrete. He freed one plate-sized chunk using the shovel as a lever, and exposed beneath it a layer of orange-red clay. There was sandstone gravel there, too, but not as much. He cleared down to the clay over as much of the surface of the grave as he could, then put the hose back in. The hole filled like a tiny swimming pool.

By the time the grave was two feet deep, he felt sure if he kept on he would die. His arms trembled. Great blisters had risen on his hands. His shirt was soaked through front and back, and rivers of sweat stained his jeans and pooled like lava in his boots. His heart pounded as he once again filled the hole with water then threw himself flat on his back on the ground, one arm over his eyes to block the merciless sun.

\* \* \* \*

"You dumb bastard," was Dennis Hale's greeting when John found his way back to their shared dorm room. "You cry-baby prick. Now you think you're the Evil for doing what's best for yourself... Crack your thick head open and absorb the truth, Harper. There is no Evil. There is no Good. Watching your own back is not a crime."

"Shut up," was all John Harper could find to say.

He was sprawled over the lumpy cot of a bed in the exact position his body lay in the hot dirt beside the

grave. His roommate hovered over him, looking for all the world like a wiry, teenaged version of what all the kids called him behind his back – *Jack Frost*. With shocking white hair and skin barely a shade grayer, he was almost albino, but not quite. His eyes were not pink.

"You're a School-bot, Hale," John said. "The difference between you and me is I'm smart enough to know when I'm damned."

"Well, if you're damned anyway, you might as well live it up."

"They're shipping Anne to Springfield."

"Who cares? You got what you wanted."

In memory, John Harper sprang to his feet, a breath away from exploding with a fury he no longer cared to control. Dennis Hale shot past him and scuttled out the door.

"And so did Anne!" his voice echoed as he vanished down the long hallway. "You're not Saints! You're both sluts! Give it up, Harper!" And he was gone.

If his roommate had been completely wrong, John Harper would have chased him down and broken both his arms. But he couldn't know for sure now, because he couldn't trust himself to know. *The Evil*

*consumes its prey quickly*, he thought, and he could feel himself disappearing in chunks down its black gullet.

When they told him the next day he could forget about the abortion because Anne had killed herself rather than face the procedure, he just nodded and walked away. It didn't seem to have anything to do with him.

\* \* \* \*

He decided to offer himself no kinder consideration than he'd shown Anne or the baby, and he dug the next two feet through rock and clay and mud without stopping to daydream. Every time he was certain he couldn't lift the shovel again, he refocused his fury and dug and dug, heart pounding, tiny lights beginning to swim past his eyes. At four feet he pressed wildly on to five, and then fainted.

When they found him the sun had set, and it was hard to tell which smelled worse, John Harper or the now seriously decomposing sheep. *They* were two boys from B-Dorm sent to find out why he hadn't returned for dinner. They pulled him roughly from the grave and he sat watching as they rolled the stinking sheep into the pit. Two shovels appeared and, as his rescuers made quick work of filling the grave, they waved for him to go on and not to wait for them to finish. Stomach cramping, clothes stiff with mud, body aching everywhere, he nodded a

quick thanks, then set out alone across the field,  
toward the distant gray lights of the dorm.

## Chapter Three: The Miracle

Of course, Anne Gold did not take her own life that afternoon, or that of the baby inside her. That story was a lie, like so many lies told kids by staff at the Special School, this one cleverly designed to serve two purposes.

The first was to break John Harper, who, as a seasoned veteran of the School, should have seen the lie for what it was and, at the very least, questioned its veracity. But he had already lost faith in himself – betrayer of Anne, his baby, the Good – so in his weakened state he willingly hefted the heavy lie up onto his shoulders and collapsed beneath its weight.

The second purpose of the lie was to cover the truth of Anne Gold's miraculous escape.

At 3:00 PM on the same afternoon Miss Bray escorted John Harper to Superintendent Meyer's office, she summoned Anne to her own, to share her parents' decision to change Schools. At 3:10 Miss Bray mentioned, as if an aside, that Anne would be wise to eat at most a light dinner, as a staffer would gather her at 7:00 PM to take her to the campus clinic, where her pregnancy would be terminated. By 3:30, Anne was back in her dorm room, sitting alone on the bed, feeling every tick of the wall clock ping through the chrome braces on her teeth like little sparks of electric



fire. Only clenching her jaws together tightly kept her teeth from chattering.

And in that moment of darkest waiting, the Evil seemingly poised to have its wicked way with her, caught in the wake of adult decisions she had no power to influence, let alone control, Anne Gold did what John Harper had failed to do, what Children of the Good are sworn to do in such times of trial.

Anne Gold prayed.

She closed her eyes and prayed to the Good. She prayed to *the woman* to plead her case to the Good. She prayed to be rescued. She prayed for the baby so alive inside her body. She prayed for John Harper, who she did not yet know had betrayed her, though she would have prayed for him then, anyway, had she known. She prayed for the Grace to accept whatever fate befell her, and for the strength to cling only to the Good no matter where the next few hours took her. She prayed for a miracle.

There are three conflicting stories as to what, exactly, happened next.

Anne, herself, has never been able to say with certainty whether she opened her eyes during the course of the miracle or not. She'd been praying with the palms of her hands pressed hard against her eyes, and though it makes rational sense she must have

lowered her hands and opened her eyes at some point, she has no memory of doing either. She envisions herself now, looking back, as a skinny teenage girl, eyes shut, face covered, abruptly standing because her dorm room has appeared inexplicably before her, seen right through cupped hands, softly illuminated by the silver-white radiance of a light no larger than a single drop of water that hovers in the air before her. She remembers following the tiny light, hands never leaving her face, elbows jutting forward, as the orb bobs out the door and into the hallway, past rooms with open doors filled with music or flickering TVs, past a sullen RA watching for trouble in the hallway, down three flights of stairs, past a janitor pushing his broom, out the front door of the School and into the afternoon sun. All Special Schools are equipped with manned watchtowers, and in her vision Anne walks past at least two of these as if she is invisible. The dot of light leads her to a wide tear in the chain link fence that looks like a bomb has gone off, splitting a portion of the fence wide, woven steel links melting back in smoky curls. Beyond the fence is twenty yards of mowed clearing, then dense woods surrounding the School on all sides. Anne slips through the fence, and it is only once she is well past the tree line that she clearly remembers her hands at her sides, attached to arms churning furiously as she runs and runs...

Behind locked office doors, School staffers constructed the story of a carefully planned breakout,

complete with student accomplices and School employees either bribed (by Anne's parents, maybe?) or so wildly inattentive to their duties that they must be removed from service, either way. The exploded fence did not make it into their version of the story because there is simply no rational explanation for that detail. So that obvious, gaping fissure in both the official inside story and the School's legendary defenses was simply removed from the narrative, quietly mended, then forgotten. The janitor was fired, but a larger investigation never materialized.

The third reckoning of the events of that fateful afternoon eventually became the only story anybody remembers. There was no escape. Nothing even close to a miracle occurred. Despondent over her impending abortion and the loss of her best friend, now boyfriend, John Harper, Anne died by her own hand, and in such a gruesome manner that her coffin had to remain sealed throughout the funeral. All Special School students were required to attend a full Secular Mass in her honor, and to follow in parade as the slender box containing her body was carried to the front gate and loaded into the back of a waiting hearse. The long vehicle pulled away, lights on, and the gate was sealed behind it. Life returned to normal.

But none of these stories ever leaked, or much mattered, beyond the gates and tall fences of the Special School itself. The woods Anne found herself running through when her hands fell away from her

eyes were dense, but not deep. Thorn trees and brambles with no path between them sawed at her arms and tore at her clothing, but she kept running hard, and, after a shockingly brief interval, the woods opened again into a new clearing, and there was Arkady.

She emerged from the tree line in a low, dry ditch, body aching, panting for breath, but wide-eyed and burning with energy. Up the hill was a blacktop parking lot lined with rusty metal dumpsters and the receiving docks of stores. There was the back of McCormick's furniture store, Kent's Rent to Own, a fast food Mexican restaurant that hadn't been there the last time she'd laid eyes on the town at the age of nine. But she remembered the other stores. She knew where she was.

She climbed the low hill and made her way east to the end of the lot, where she could cut through and around to the front of the strip center. A girl her own age wearing a green *Comida Mexicana* apron watched in silence from the drive thru window as Anne walked past in the wrong direction. When she turned the front corner and found herself facing 12th Street, the local name for the section of State highway 160 that ran through the center of town, she felt her run-shaky legs giving way beneath her, so she spun into a white metal chair beside one of *Comida Mexicana's* deserted outdoor patio dining tables. No one came out to ask if she was going to order food, so she let

herself cry shamelessly, right there in front of she didn't care who, as the Arkady of her childhood flooded in from every direction.

Across the street was Foster's Farm & Home, where toys and old fashioned candy sold right next to sweet feed, alfalfa cubes, and horse wormer. Beside that, Wendy's Wash & Wax, with people busily spraying and scrubbing their vehicles. Wilson's Pharmacy. Family Dollar. The red tractor dealership no one thought would last, still in business right across the street from John Deere. An insurance salesman. A real estate office. Then Cherry Street, where she knew if she turned and ran two blocks north she'd find the Barrett County Library, and directly behind it, facing 9th Street, her parents' home.

Her home.

*Home.*

Miss Bray, had she been there, would have urged Anne to fight the yearning that rose inside her with every breath to run home and fall helpless into her mother's arms, to feel the press of her body and bury her face in the warm, clean smell of her mother's hair. Her mother, after all— and Daddy, too, don't forget him — had abandoned her for fear of the government to reeducation at the Special School. Her mother — and Daddy, too — had failed to visit her even once in all those years. To them she had been dead, written

off and forgotten with the signing of her *Warrant of Confinement* that day long ago. No comfort could justify forgiving such spineless disregard. The Special School discouraged forgiveness of any kind, as such altruism, they taught, insulted *the self*.

But Miss Bray was far away now, and seven years of daily *Gospel of Self* classes, weekly Secular Masses, and endless hard *lessons* had failed to crush the Child of the Good within her, and with all the innocence of the child she, herself, still was at sixteen, Anne Gold found her legs and without thinking or worrying to breathe sprinted the two blocks to Cherry, then two more to 9th Street, up gray wooden steps, past the porch swing on its rusting chains, and right on up to the white wooden door and the lighted golden doorbell, which she stabbed with a finger over and over, at least ten times without stopping.

And when the door swung wide, the scene played out exactly as she'd dreamed it so many times in the prison of the Special School. The white door sucking inward, *whooshing* against carpet. Mom stepping back. Tears as her heart knows the frazzled teen on her porch to be her own little girl, returned to life. Arms opening to receive, the door closing behind them.

And the *forgiveness*, oh, the forgiveness. And the warmth, and the welcoming. The soft press of bodies and the smell of clean hair. And the Good, like

fireworks, bursting all around them, sparkling their tears and making everything glow.

## Chapter Four: The Reprieve

The thing no one noticed in John Harper's spectacular plummet from grace following the news of Anne's death— even John, himself, missed it — is that his beliefs did not fundamentally change. He just switched sides.

*Good and evil can only be said to exist as relative measures in the pursuit of personal goals. If your goal is to become a doctor, whatever helps you attain your degree — hard work, study, financial aid, effective cheating — can be measured as good. Whatever stands in your way — poverty, sloth, competitors for internships — would be relative evils. If you desire to rob a bank, shooting the security guard before he can unholster his weapon is good. Your gun jamming so he gets the first shot is evil. For you. For the guard, those labels would be reversed. The ancient idea of objective Good and Evil, divorced from a unique human self pursuing its own service, is an insult to reason and cannot exist. Only the individual can say what is good or evil for him or her self, and the wise individual allows such judgments to evolve over time with experience and changing circumstances.*

-- The Gospel of Self, A Student's Guide, Chapter 1

John Harper found *The Gospel of Self* laughable. As a boy, he'd listened, entranced, as older kids told the story of the Good and the Evil and their war for human souls in furtive whispers during recess. He



listened with full knowledge that children vanished every year behind the high fence of the Special School for telling this story, and even just for listening. This was secret knowledge, a great truth parents hid from their children, and that the Special School existed to erase from the mind of any kid brave enough to believe it. But that only made the act of hearing, and eventually, retelling the story seem all the more heroic.

Did John Harper really believe the story then, at six, seven, eight years old? Hard to say. But he wanted to believe, he wanted it all to be true so much that, at the age of nine, when a fourth grader told John and a group of his third grade friends on the playground that he belonged to a secret club called The Children of the Good, and he could prove the Good was real and the Evil had all their parents in its grip, that night, when his house went dark, John went out the window, to brave the spooky yards and alleys of Arkady at night.

\* \* \* \*

*"Hale!"* he hissed in such a loud stage whisper he might as well have shouted the name. He scooped up a handful of driveway gravel and tossed one, then two pieces, then the whole handful at the second story window behind which Dennis Hale was not sleeping. The window opened and the white-haired boy slid out, grabbed the branch of a tree, shinnied

his way to the trunk and then dropped to the grass. They ran together to Paul Rankin's house, the principal's own son, and found him hiding behind the giant three-bay garage, awaiting their arrival. He joined the pair without a word, and they scurried on to Neil Coleman's wreck of a house beside the junk yard his old man owned. Neil's dad stayed drunk most of the time, and liked to punish Neil in ways that in a larger community would send him to jail. But in Arkady a man was the king of his castle, so all eyes looked away, and Neil was already growing up hard and mean. But he had sense enough to join the other boys that night, in search of rescue from the Evil, or at least some sure way to kill it dead.

Their destination was a teen party spot in the woods called Hobo Camp, a hidden cove off City Lake where log benches circled a fire pit filled with crushed beer cans. When the boys stepped into the clearing, about a dozen kids, mostly third graders, more boys than girls, already clustered on the benches or stood in cold silence, hands in pockets. No one knew how to start a fire or dared try.

John and his friends stayed close to the path back to town, hovering together, not sure what to do next, ready to run at the first sign of trouble. The fourth grader from the playground was there, and he stood as if their arrival was some kind of signal to begin.

"*The woman* is the Mother of the Good," he said quietly, addressing everyone assembled. "The Good used to be in charge, but then the Evil took over. It tricked all our parents into thinking bad is good, and they're bad to us now all the time and they don't even know it. But the Good is coming back, and soon. He's coming to rescue us all, to take the world back and make the Evil pay. Till He gets here, *the woman* helps us stay good and tells us what we need to know to be ready for the day her *seed* – her son, but that's what she calls him, her *seed* – until the Good gets here. You've heard all about *the woman* in the story. Well, she's not just a story. She's real. The Children of the Good meet her here in this spot, once every month, on the first night the moon doesn't come out. The New Moon. That's tonight. You don't have to believe me. In a few minutes you'll see her for yourself."

And with that, he sat down again.

The trees were alive with cicadas and the lake with frogs, so to say they waited in silence, then, would not be true. But they sat or stood without speaking, listening to the night sounds around them, for what seemed an unlikely interval for a group of mostly third graders huddled outdoors in the dark.

When the frogs and cicadas fell silent as one, true quiet pressed everyone breathless. There was motion on the lake. A white form the size of a dog drifted toward them on the water, and became a swan as it

neared the shore. It did not step up onto the land, but rather halted abruptly, craned its long neck and stretched its ivory wings, then simply vanished as the campsite exploded into light.

John Harper saw the outline of a woman about the height and contour of his own mom etched into the hot white center of the group. The children closest to her, boys and girls alike, had fallen to their knees with their hands clasped before them and their eyes rolled back into their heads. The fourth grader stood in front of them, calmly conversing with *the woman* as naturally as he might had his own mother entered the circle.

John's ears filled with static like a radio between stations with the volume cranked high. He couldn't hear anything *the woman* or the fourth grader were saying to each other, but he knew something brand new was happening inside him. As if a switch had flipped, all the things he'd ever wanted to believe about the Good and *the woman* and heroic human souls were now facts as certain as his own birthday. He knew the Evil shouldn't be in control of the world, but it was, by tricks and deception, and *the woman* was the way the Good snuck behind enemy lines with its plan to save them all. He couldn't even guess what it all added up to. But he understood he'd been a Child of the Good long before this secret meeting, and he was here, with his friends, this night, because the

Good had called him. And that was all he needed to know.

Dennis Hale witnessed the explosion of light, but never did see *the woman*. From where he stood, the whole campsite went off like a bomb and everybody went crazy. Later, John would convince him to join The Children of the Good anyway, despite his doubts, a decision he would regret barely a year later when the school board recommended the lot of them for reeducation.

Paul Rankin never saw or heard anything. He was standing closest to the path, and when the first silence fell, he panicked and sprinted for home. When John and Dennis later described the explosion of light and *the woman* appearing from nowhere, he said they were nuts. He'd looked back a dozen times to see if the rest were following, and Hobo Camp was never anything but pitch black dark. And silent. No light, no static, no voices, no nothing. He stopped talking to anyone he remembered being present that night, and in the last near-summer weeks of their own fourth grade year, when the Special School finally swept them all up in its net, Paul was the little fish that got away. It wasn't hard to figure out what happened, his dad being the principal and all.

Neil Coleman was a special case. He'd seen everything John had, but he'd heard everything, too. He'd heard what *the woman* and the boy from fourth

grade talked about. His was the deeper revelation, perhaps because he needed it more. But he refused to share what he'd heard. It belonged to him, and him alone, and if the rest had missed out, well, they should have been paying better attention. He joined The Children of the Good, but he never talked when they met. He just listened and nodded a lot.

\* \* \* \*

Seventeen year old John Harper found *The Gospel of Self* contemptible for teaching that objective Good and Evil do not exist. He knew first hand they were both not only real, they were *persons* who acted on the world and competed for the souls of men. In his moment of weakness, his betrayal of Anne and the Good, he had not surrendered his certainty that the Good and the Evil were real – he had simply chosen, however poorly, between them.

With one self-serving choice he had damned himself, eternally, motivated by nothing nobler than pure, selfish weakness. And Anne had died. Their baby had died. He hated himself, and started acting the way he figured a person who knew he was damned would behave – to the delight of Commandant Meyer, Miss Bray, and all the Special School staff who had begun to doubt he would ever come around. How happy they were to pronounce him cured and push him out the big gate before he could stain their perfect record.

\* \* \* \*

For his eighteenth birthday, John Harper received his freedom.

The bus dropped him at the Courthouse in the center of the Arkady Town Square. Mom and Dad would be here to pick him up, and he guessed he'd live with them for a while, till he got his bearings and decided what to do next. The discipline of daily life in the Special School had been rigid and grueling in the extreme. But it was all he'd known for nearly half his life. He had no idea what to expect from the Arkady beyond its fences.

He could not have expected what he found.

As he stepped from the echoing Courthouse hallway through the unnaturally tall doors leading into the Courtroom, there they were. His father, grayer than he had imagined, having sprouted glasses, and wearing a gray flannel suit that made him look like somebody's grandfather. Tiny Mom in her sun dress beside him, also grayer than she ought to be in her early forties, but still beautiful.

And next to her, a ghost. Two ghosts, really.

Anne Gold sat beside his mother, looking stunningly seventeen and vibrantly, gloriously, enormously pregnant.

He fell to his knees right there in the aisle. "*Anne... How?*"

She was suddenly kneeling before him. She touched his face. "It's okay..."

With each word, a sobbing gasp for air. "*I... am... so... sorry...*" Then in quick bursts "Stay away, Anne... Hate me... Kill me... I'm evil... I'm lost..."

And though he was disintegrating right there in front of her, his face in his hands, the whole Courtroom shamelessly staring, watching him crumble... Ann Gold laughed – and with her laughter returned to John Harper the fate of his immortal soul.

"No," she said, simply, and laughed again, now laughing and crying at the same time. "I love you, and I know you love me. We're going to have a baby. Now get up, sign your paperwork, and take me home."

And that's what he did.



## Chapter Five: The Queen of the World

By the day of John Harper's release from the Special School, the baby in Anne's womb was barely three months away from staging its own commencement into the outside world. With the consent of Anne's parents, who were also in the courtroom on the day of John's reprieve, when that second Harper graduation day arrived, baby Nelly was applauded to life by her legally married parents, John and Anne Harper, and by two very happy sets of grandparents.

Arkady instantly judged them by appearances – the pregnant teen shotgun-married to the bad kid from the School – and John and Anne made a decision never to challenge that perception. The town's smug disapproval was a convenient line past which observation simply did not cross. Arkady knew exactly who they'd always be and what they'd never amount to, so no one paid a lick of attention to how the Harpers actually lived. No one cared enough to notice when John was hired at eighteen, first to wash tractors, then to pay bills and process payroll in the office at John Deere, or when he distinguished himself and in less than five years became the youngest office manager in the state, earning a living wage. They joined the *Fellowship of Self Church*, where all the guys from John Deere brought their families. They bought a house with a view of City Lake, and prepared to live happily ever after.

For all appearances, they were Arkadyans, through and through.

But night after night, behind closed doors or in whispers on the porch, they secretly warmed the ember of the truth with their breath, telling and retelling the story, reminding one another of *the woman*, and the Good, and to never forget how they'd been rescued from slavery and graced with a life surprisingly rich and sweet on the inside, however bitter its faux candy coating.

The hard part was keeping their dual life from Nelly. Their own childhoods stolen by a government fearful of even the suggestion of something larger than itself, they vowed to keep Nelly in the dark until her eighteenth birthday, when the Special School couldn't touch her.

But some secrets are simply too large to contain, and it soon became clear that their well-meaning plan to protect Nelly had gone terribly awry.

\* \* \* \*

It started with the TV.

"Find the queen show, Daddy."

It was Saturday morning. John and Anne sipped coffee together at the dining room table, while five year old Nelly reclined on the living room floor,

holding down a button on the remote that made the channels spin and spin.

"What queen, baby?"

Nelly dropped the remote and the TV settled on a cable news station.

"The Queen of the World," Nelly insisted, twisting around to face her parents, her tiny brow knitting with frustration. "The one whose baby kills the snake."

They lowered their coffee cups together, as if on cue.

"The snake from the trees," Nelly added. "Who hides in the smoke."

Their eyes locked across the table.

"I don't think I know that one," John said. "Let's turn off the TV and go to the park, okay?"

"Yay!" Nelly jumped up and ran to her parents, leaving the TV set on. She climbed onto her father's lap. "Park!" she announced.

What Nelly thought of as the "park" was really the primary school playground barely two blocks from their home, a pleasant morning walk for the three of them. John and Anne finished their coffee on a bench

watching Nelly swing and play in the sandbox. When she decided she was hungry, they headed for home.

As they reached their own yard, the air came alive with music, rising and falling like painted horses on a merry-go-round. John looked for an ice cream truck to appear around the corner, then realized the music was coming from his own house.

"The Queen!" Nelly squealed and shot off toward the house at a dead run. The door was unlocked and she disappeared inside.

"We left the TV on," Anne said.

"Oh."

They crossed the yard, circus music in the air. And then a lilting voice, female and melodic:

*The snake, the snake,  
the old evil snake,  
sneaks into the town  
when no one's awake.  
He bites all the people,  
and steals all their love,  
and makes them forget about  
goodness above.*

*But you, little urchin,  
have nothing to fear.*

*The Mother of Good  
is always near,  
to hold you till love,  
like a raging fire  
returns to devour that  
snakey old liar*

*But don't tell a soul... Shhhhhh!*

As they rushed through the door and into the living room, the music stopped, replaced by the excited chatter of a blue-suited weatherman, one arm swinging circles over a patch of green radar, as if conjuring rain. Nelly stood, facing the TV, arms dangling at her sides.

"Nelly?"

"Daddy? What's an urchin?"

"I don't know, baby. Let's look it up."

He sat down in front of the computer, and Nelly climbed into his lap.

*ur•chin*

## **Noun**

1. *A mischievous young child, esp. one who is poorly or raggedly dressed.*

## 2. *A goblin.*

"A goblin. That's you, alright," he said, "But I like your clothes." They laughed together. Soon they were lost in pictures of goblins, then funny animal videos.

\* \* \* \*

Nelly was coloring in front of the TV. John and Anne backed away together into the kitchen.

"She overheard us talking?"

"I don't think so," John said. "You heard the song. And so did Nelly, obviously. That was real. It's like all of a sudden there's a kids' show about the story on national TV. They'd never let that happen."

"She said the queen whose baby kills the snake. We always say *the woman's seed*, and *the Evil...*"

"But it's the same story. She's not getting it from us. She can't really be getting it from TV, can she?"

"The playground?"

"She's never alone there. We'd know if she was talking to other kids."

"Can we just ask her? She thinks it's a TV show. We don't have to tell her any different."

More than just any TV show, *The Queen of the World Show* was Nelly's favorite, and she'd seen it for the first time in a dream. In the dream, the queen lived up in the sky, in a castle that rested on a cloud in the daytime and the moon at night. Her baby was the king of the world below, but his kingdom had been stolen by a bad snake who wanted to hurt everybody. Because the snake had bitten all the people and his poison was inside them, the people hurt each other and did bad things. They acted like the snake. The baby king wanted to save them all and take back his kingdom, but to do that, he'd have to kill the snake – which he couldn't do while the people still had the poison inside them. Killing the snake would kill the people under its spell, as well. To win the day, he'd have to cure everybody of their snakebite first. So the baby king and his mother the queen made a plan...

Being five, it had not surprised Nelly one bit when *The Queen of the World Show* appeared on the real TV. She loved to watch it and knew all the characters and songs. It sounded like she watched the show pretty much every day, which was simply not possible, with Anne rarely out of her daughter's sight, and never out of earshot. Maybe she watched the show in her dreams, and made no distinction between sleeping and waking? However that worked, from the long talk her parents had with their daughter that Saturday morning, passing into afternoon, three things became clear:

1. Nelly, at the age of five, had developed a sophisticated understanding of the story, the Evil, the Good, *the woman*, all of it. She understood in kid metaphors, but she had a very thorough grasp of the basics, down to fine details.

2. She had not overheard her parents talking, and was never aware that afternoon that they were discussing anything larger than a favorite television show. No person, child or adult, had told her anything. *The Queen of the World Show* was the only source of her knowledge.

3. However this private revelation to their little girl was taking place, it had progressed from the realm of dreams to manifestation in the waking world. They had both heard the song that morning, and still had it stuck inside their heads, circling round and round in their minds like a merry-go-round.

They kept pretending it was just a TV show, and made a fun family routine of giving Nelly center stage every evening at dinner as she retold in excited kid language what happened on that day's episode of *The Queen of the World*. Nelly never asked why they didn't just sit and watch it with her. She liked the spotlight, and was happy to be their go-between. Adding the content of Nelly's daily revelations to their own long-defended understanding, John and Anne Harper began to suspect that events long prophesied in the story had begun to unfold right there in their own



home, with their precocious daughter Nelly at the center of what was increasingly difficult to picture as anything short of a gathering storm.

\* \* \* \*

Then Nelly started school, and the storm clouds darkened.

On her first day at Kindergarten, once all the children had participated in a healthy round of tears at being left on their own, the teacher, Mrs. Rankin, gathered everyone in a circle and asked them to share something special about themselves.

"I'm special," one girl said proudly, "because my father is a judge. He sends people to jail."

Mrs. Rankin smiled. "Your father is special for being a judge, that's very true, Jennifer. But you are special just for being you. We'll spend a lot of time this year finding out just how special everyone is."

Like a fairy sprinkling magic dust, she swept a hand over the children's heads in a wide arc, with every eye following.

"Every one of you is the most important person in the world!" she said.

And they all giggled and loved her, believing every word.

"I'm special because I have more toys than anybody."

"I can already read and write my name."

"I'm going to be the President when I grow up!"

Nelly's turn came. She had planned to say she was special because she could sing every song on *The Queen of the World Show* by heart. Then a voice:

*Don't tell a soul... Shhhhh!*

And it was just that loud, though not a single head turned. She must never, ever, mention *The Queen of the World* outside her own home. The queen and her baby were real. Betray them and the snake wins – and that means the end of the world. She could not say how she suddenly knew this, but she did. Ice filled her veins and froze her body solid.

They were waiting on Nelly. Mrs. Rankin's eyes narrowed, as if she wanted to squeeze and squeeze a response out of the little girl before her. She opened her mouth and smiled down with teeth altogether too sharp and perfect and white...

And Nelly was a mouse, trembling while a snake sizes her up in the grass.

"I... I...", she said, finally, words tumbling out of her mouth as if someone else put them there, "I'm special because I'm pretty. Everybody says so."

"Of course you are, Nelly," Mrs. Rankin said, beaming with approval. "Being pretty makes you very special, indeed!"

In that moment Mrs. Rankin was the ugliest thing Nelly had ever seen.

## **Part II: The Evil, Rising**

*Human beings no more know  
their own time than fish taken  
in the fatal net or birds trapped  
in the snare; like these, mortals  
are caught when an evil time  
suddenly falls upon them.*

Ecclesiastes 9:12

New American Bible

## **Chapter Six: The Evil, 1830 to 2040 - America**

The first Rankin of note in Arkady was Captain Elias P. Rankin, second in command of a cavalry troop which, throughout the 1830s, is said to have massacred every living Indian for fifty miles around the present day site of the town. The Black Hawk War, in which young Abraham Lincoln served his brief military service, was going on about that time and not too far away, but rumors of that officially declared conflict only served as cover for Captain Rankin's personal war on the native Peoples. He killed Indians because he was mean and full of hate and enjoyed taking human life, and in those days you could kill as many "savages" as you pleased, no one cared.

Legend has it that, one night, while Elias Rankin was drunk on whiskey and the blood of his victims, an Indian boy no older than twelve slipped under the wall of his tent to find the white man passed out naked on his cot. The boy split the Captain's skull with his own sword, then was, himself, shot dead while trying to escape out the front flap of the tent.

It took Rankin several days to die of his wound, but there was no patching him together, either. His skull was really and truly split, right through the bone and down into the spongy pink flesh of his brain. He laid there for three days, naked and fevered and bloody, the sword still lodged in his head, and he only

opened his eyes once to announce that an angel had descended from heaven to reveal to him that on the very spot where he lay, Noah's Ark had first found dry land after the flood. That Noah's Ark is well known to have landed on Mount Ararat, along the Turkish-Iranian border, and that there was not a mountain to be found within ten days hard ride in any direction from the old bastard's dying body, were facts no one was cruel enough to mention, so the story stuck – and they say that's how the town got its name, *Arkady*, with the accent peculiarly on the first syllable like that.

The next Rankin to distinguish himself was Thomas Fillmore Rankin, the only recorded serial-deserter in Arkady history. During the Civil War, the state officially aligned with the Union, but the people's loyalties were split right down the middle. Families were torn, as a father donned gray while his sons wore blue, and many slaughtered their own kin on the battlefield. In an effort to avoid actual conflict of any kind, Thomas Rankin switched sides many times, changing uniforms to join up with whoever won the last battle. He used many different names, and is said to have had at least two complete families, one North and one South. There was plenty of chaos to go around on both sides, so he managed to safely ride out the war this way without notice – except by historians, whose public account of his shame didn't appear until he was long dead and had gotten away with it.

The first moneyed Rankins appeared soon after the attack on Pearl Harbor, and America's entry into World War II. In February, 1942, President Roosevelt signed *Executive Order 9066* authorizing the forced internment of 120,000 Japanese Americans, primarily from the Pacific Coast, into camps in seven states. Roger "Jesse James" Rankin, who had, to that date, facelessly survived most of the Great Depression as a drifter and petty con man, was among the first to recognize the golden opportunity hidden in so many people being forced from their homes at one time, many with as little as forty-eight hours notice of evacuation. True to his outlaw nickname, "Jesse James" Rankin mounted a caravan of fellow hustlers who arrived in California with trucks, cash, and clean, lawyerish suits to swindle desperate families out of all their worldly possessions, paying pennies on the dollar. When the houses were resold, and the trucks full of furniture and jewelry and household items had been liquidated, Roger Rankin left California a very wealthy man. His return to Arkady in the style of a victorious monarch was greeted with distaste by a few in the political class who understood where his riches originated, but, after Pearl Harbor, most Americans hated the Japanese and plain didn't care.

They say the only thing less wholesome than a dishonest man is a rich dishonest man, and Richard "Jesse James" Rankin proved the rule on that one. Amidst a series of failed marriages and uncounted philanderings, a Baby Boom of Rankins spread over

Arkady well in advance of the official post-war population explosion. This generation of Rankins were all children born within just a few years of each other, so the 1950s and much of the '60s passed in relative obscurity for the clan. Those were the quiet "growing years."

There was a brief, but significant, flash on the historical horizon circa 1968, when the beautiful but misguided twenty-two year old "Peacedove" Rankin (real name, Elizabeth Clair) hitchhiked all the way to the San Jacinto Mountains east of Los Angeles to join Timothy Leary's *Brotherhood of Eternal Love Commune*. When Leary was arrested later that year for marijuana possession, and it looked like he'd soon be doing hard time, Peacedove returned to Arkady, tattooed and sullen, and seven months later gave birth to a boy she named, spitefully, most thought, Timothy Lovechild Rankin.

On the boy's thirteenth birthday, Peacedove hit the cinderblock east wall of the Tri-City Grocery Store in her bright yellow 1957 VW Beetle, doing well over 70 MPH in town. There was speculation about suicide, or if maybe she'd been running toward or away from something or someone when the crash occurred, but her death was ruled accidental and dropped. When no one stepped forward to claim the army duffle bag found next to her body in what was left of the front seat, or the \$40,000 cash stuffed inside it, the money followed her son to the home of Peacedove's sister,



Eloise Boyle, whose husband, Joe Boyle, was the Arkady Postmaster.

By high school, Timothy Lovechild Rankin became just Tim Rankin, no middle name, and he graduated in the top ten percent of his class. His combo graduation gift and eighteenth birthday present – from his mother, they told him – was a cashier's check for the \$40,000, which the Boyles put in trust for him and never touched. He used it as a healthy down payment on a Bachelor's Degree in Political Science and a Juris Doctor from Chicago's Illinois Institute of Technology. He graduated with honors in 1994, passed the Bar on the first try, and walked straight into a job in the Patent Law division of Morris, Cooper, Smith & Powell, LLP in Chicago.

There's another old saying that you can take the boy out of Arkady, but good luck prying Arkady out of the boy – especially if he's a Rankin. A lawyer at twenty-six, already working for a top-100 international firm, Tim Rankin seemed poised for a meteoric, if somewhat traditional, rise to success. But his genes had gifted him with a lazy eye for opportunity, and as that eye lolled over the hundreds of client records stored in the MCS&P Patent Law file room, a vision began to emerge by which he might, with just a few clever moves, put his impressive six figure starting salary to shame.

This was in the early years of the US "Dot Com" tech bubble of the '90s, and it seemed every week a new gadget or web-widget made somebody a millionaire, all predicated on incestuous technologies being developed so quickly, one atop the other, that no one but a lawyer with finely-tuned research skills and access to a first class Patent Law library could even begin to sort it out. Tim Rankin found himself in the right place at the right time, and he quietly researched, and then purchased a series of patents from unsuspecting inventors who didn't realize what they had, or how what they'd invented had already been stolen and evolved into new devices by the likes of Samsung, Apple, HP, Microsoft, or Dell.

He maintained this quiet research and acquisition phase of his plan through February, 2000, when it was clear the "Y2K" bomb had been defused and the media-hyped end of the world wasn't going to happen. Then, beginning that summer, he filed a series of lawsuits for patent infringement, half a dozen of which settled quickly out of court, netting him a cool twenty million by Christmas. Once the tech bubble predictably burst the next year, he invested his millions buying stock in the same companies he'd just sued, at fire sale prices. They all eventually recovered, the NASDAQ righted itself then shot through the roof, and by thirty-three, Tim Rankin was a billionaire.

For his fortieth birthday, he gifted himself a stunningly beautiful twenty year old wife, Jessica Mayberry Rankin, who had once been a pre-teen child star on cable TV. Her post-puberty re-launch as a trashy pop singer had been savagely rejected by the music-buying parents of her young fans, but a scandalously erotic performance on the 2009 MTV Music Awards won her Tim's rapt attention, and soon after, a share in his fortune. The couple relocated to Arkady, where, before the year ended, Jessica produced their only begotten son – and the first Rankin who would play an active role in the lives of John, Anne and Nelly Harper – Marion Francis Rankin.

By 2040, when John Harper, Dennis Hale, Neil Coleman, and Marion Francis Rankin's own son, Paul, were all born, grown up Marion was thirty years old, and had been appointed Principal of Arkady R1 Combined Elementary and Middle Schools. Every child in the district under the age of thirteen passed before him, to be sorted like sheep from goats, with compliant sheep promoted on to high school, then college and happy careers and lives, and unruly goats redirected to the Special School for reeducation.

Why the child of a billionaire would accept such mundane employment, and what, precisely, Marion Francis Rankin was watching for in that decades-long

procession of children past his open office door, are very good questions, indeed.

## Chapter Seven: The Evil, 1970 to 2012, India

On Wednesday, August 1st, 2012, when Marion Francis Rankin was just two years old, his father vanished, taking most of his fortune with him. It's not that Tim Rankin left his new wife and child in the usual way, divorcing Jessica to marry some mistress, say. Nor was there intrigue – he was not killed or kidnapped, that anybody knew of. He did not leave his family destitute. Instead, billionaire Tim Rankin quietly carved out a very comfortable nest egg in Jessica's name only, had his own name removed from the titles of their mansion, automobiles and other Arkady properties, signed his active business holdings into receivership until the unspecified date of his return, then, for all appearances, ceased to exist anywhere on the face of the earth.

Of course, Tim Rankin was still on earth. He just was no longer "Tim Rankin." He'd traded that plain American moniker for *Maium Hum*, the Hindi words for "I AM," and, in a move that would have made his reputed father proud, he'd chucked it all to take Sadhu vows at the Paramātmā svaya Divine Self Ashram, somewhere along the Ganges River, in the foothills of the Himalayas.

Tim Rankin had found religion.

At the center of the Paramātmā svaya ashram was the person and teaching of His Divine Grace, Swami

Ātma pyāra, a man born, like Tim Rankin, in the USA. He'd come to India in the early Seventies as an adjunct Professor of Philosophy at Panjab University in Chandigarh. Just as America's youth were flocking to India for a taste of ancient Hindu religious mystique, India's intellectual class was grasping for a toehold on modern Western, Capitalist thought, and Ātma pyāra, whose name was Terry Oglesby at the time, arrived riding the later wave. His specialty was the Objectivist philosophies of Ayn Rand and her followers, Nathaniel Branden and Leonard Peikoff. An avowed atheist, Oglesby advocated reason as the only legitimate means of acquiring knowledge. He eschewed "do-gooder" altruism of any kind, rejected collectivism and Stateism, and taught his students, many of whom would go on to become the movers and shakers of India's economic rebirth during the '80s and '90s, that true morality could arise only from the free choice of an individual human will serving its own ends. Egoism, he taught, was not only ethical, the lack of a healthy self-love and dedication to self-service was the very definition of mental illness.

Being an American in India in the Seventies, it was inevitable that Oglesby would eventually rub shoulders with the rising tide of hippies, yippies, mystics and drugged out wayfarers washing up daily onto India's shores. Though he found the invading vagabond army's blanket substitution of superstition and wish fulfillment for rational thought annoying, he had to admit the girls were foxy. And that one

compromise of his staunch Objectivist discipline sent him spiraling down the slippery slope of 1970s All-American sex, drugs and rock and roll counterculture, in exactly that order.

The girl's given name was Bethany, but she preferred *Starfire*. Their meeting at the Amērikī paba Bar and Mostly-Vegetarian Grill clearly marked the beginning of the sex portion of his mystical conversion process, but their chance encounter might also qualify as the first of his drug experiences, as, from their very first conversation, the only word worthy of describing his affection for her company was *addiction*. He couldn't get enough of her. Her philosophy was a naive' hodgepodge of Astrology, pantheism, misunderstood Hindu concepts like reincarnation, passing references to ghosts and UFOs... But what she said made no difference, really. She could recite the contents of the Delhi phone book and he would be happy to listen, so long as he could watch her lips moving, her eyes closing or growing wide with wonder or surprise, her fingers rising to twirl a golden curl as she spoke. Even in India, where women's Saris reflect the rainbow and their makeup the stars, Starfire stood out – an American rendition of a (young and beautiful, of course) Hungarian Gypsy witch, impeccably disheveled as if she'd just fallen, ever so freshly, from her broom.

The future of the entire world shifted the night Starfire introduced Terry Oglesby to acid.

As Timothy Leary explained in his classic work *The Psychedelic Experience: a Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead*, as much as ninety percent of the LSD experience depends, not on the drug itself, but on what Leary termed *Set* – the experienter's character, expectations and intentions – and *Setting*, meaning the social and physical surroundings in which the drug experience takes place. The other ten percent would, then, depend on the drug itself, and such tangible factors as source, purity and dosage.

Terry Oglesby had exactly zero control over any of these factors, as he and Starfire lay naked and blissfully post-coitus, side by side on the roof of his apartment building on the Panjab-U campus. They were passing a bottle of warm Gin between them, staring up at an ocean of eight billion stars, when the girl, intending nothing more than a pixyish prank, slipped a few hits of Windowpane into the bottle and gave it a good shake before passing it back to Terry.

Windowpane differed from most acid of the time in that it was not printed on blotter paper, but was rather cooked into incredibly thin sheets of gelatin that were cut into doses a quarter inch square. One benefit of this production technique was that hits melted like sugar on your tongue (or in a bottle of Gin). One downside was that they tended to get "sticky" when the air was hot and humid, as it was that night in Chandigarh, and what Starfire thought



sure was two, at most three hits, turned out to be nine.

Terry Oglesby knew something had changed when the girl's rambling monologue on the significance of Astrology struck him as unfathomably profound.

"Most people only know their sun sign," she was saying, "... like Scorpio or Aquarius or Libra. I'm an Aquarius, you probably guessed that already. Anyway, everybody has a moon sign, too, and that's how other people mostly see you. But you can't really understand your fate at all without knowing your rising sign and the position of at least the inner planets at the moment of your birth..."

Her words caressed his body like a soft rain of kisses, but he could not turn his head to kiss her back. His eyes were taken by eight billion stars trailing sparklers across the sky, their dance somehow a language, a hypnotic semaphore signaling *yes... yes... yes...*

He remembered being born, how pissed off it made him. Air tasted bad, light hurt his eyes, and he was *cold... cold... cold...* They wrapped him in a blanket and laid him on his mother's chest, but even this was like ice compared to the hot liquid bliss of the womb.

The stars wrapped him in a blanket of light and flung him up into the sky – and there was the whole world,

a teeming human smorgasbord below him. On a rooftop in India, he saw his own naked body, chakras spinning like multi-colored suns inside his head, his throat, his heart, his groin. And next to that living solar system of rainbows, equally unclothed and strangely alluring in the starkest imaginable tones of black and white, Starfire had become Ayn Rand:

*"Every man is his own reason and justification for being," she philosophized. "Man must live for himself. He must pursue his own ends. He must be his own champion, led only by his own mind. The pursuit of happiness and rational self-interest are the highest moral purposes in life, selfishness the only reasonable virtue... I am the miracle, I belong to me, I guard myself, I use myself, I kneel before, I bow before, I need serve first, last and only MYSELF!"*

A tempest scattered the philosopher into a thousand swirling puzzle pieces, then reassembled her into an old Sadhu in orange mendicant robes, white hair blazing like sun rays in every direction.

*"Self is the ground of all existence. The whole world is merely waves in the infinite Ocean of Self. You are that infinite Ocean... God is Self; Self is God. Look nowhere for either but in the mirror of Divine Self Love and Service..."*

And the whole of reality became a single silver mirror with millions and billions of faces reflecting up and all around, and he could see through all their eyes at once. Each human being a cosmic end unto him or her

self, each a mirror-image fragment of the one and only fully real all seeing, all knowing true cosmic mind-self-being in all the universe... To love at all was to love the self, and self-love was the only meaningful universal directive... Cosmic Self hugged him like a much beloved child, and in a mother's cooing whisper rechristened him *Ātma pyāra*...

Ātma dropped his teaching gig, let his hair grow long, and soon became the orange-robed guru of his vision, with Starfire as his queen. Together, they founded the *Paramātmā svaya Divine Self Ashram and Astrological Enlightenment Center on the Ganges*, and amassed a quick fortune catering to the spiritual needs of young Americans arrogant enough to chase enlightenment halfway across the world without even asking what language Indian Hindus spoke... The Divine Self ashram conducted all business in English only, and took out ads in Rolling Stone. Their fifty guest capacity soon became a hundred, then five hundred, as they reinvested everything in growing the business. Rock stars made Paramātmā svaya a favorite tour layover, and the guru and his queen built an amphitheater for hosting lucrative benefit concerts.

In early 1980, Starfire turned up pregnant, and confessed the baby was not Ātma's. The father had to be one of three famous lead singers, but she couldn't be sure which one until the baby was born and she

could compare its astrological chart to those of the potential dads.

That Starfire had been sleeping around came as such an insult to Ātma pyāra's sense of divine entitlement that he spun into a rage that lasted most of the year. He shut down the ashram, sent all the guests packing, and locked Starfire away in a very nicely equipped and comfortable guest suite, with an armed guard posted outside her door. She was fed lavishly three times a day, and waited on hand and foot by the ashram's few permanent residents, Ātma pyāra's most trusted disciples. But she was not allowed to leave.

The child in Starfire's womb was not the only seed growing within the now sealed perimeter of the Divine Self ashram. Wrapped tight in his own dark blanket of seclusion, Ātma pyāra began a journey of purification, gradually disentangling his mind from the circus of greed the ashram had become, in search of the pure kernel of Truth he'd received that night in Chandigarh. The revelation of Divine Self was a cosmic gift his own God-nature had bestowed upon his limited human mind, and he could hardly be blamed for having reeled a bit under the weight of his own revealed glory...

But the fun and games were over. Starfire's bastard was a gift from the same source, he could see that now. She wasn't smart enough to have betrayed him

right under his nose, like he was some common fool.  
It was the work of his God-self, in one fell motion  
demolishing the idol he'd constructed in its image,  
shocking the one true prophet of self onto a path  
finally worthy of the original revelation, and  
providing him with the child he would need to bring  
the cosmic plan to fruition.

In a fit of creativity that bordered on channeling,  
Ātma pyāra composed the entirety of the *Svaya kē  
susamācāra Sutra* in under forty-eight hours,  
committing the complete and inerrant Truth of his  
Divine Revelation to paper, scribbling faster than he  
could even read, filling notebook after notebook, a  
mound of pencils ground to nubs piling high on the  
desk before him. When the manuscript was typed, it  
weighed in at over four hundred pages, It was, of  
course, perfect, and required no editing. It was  
published the next year in America and Europe as *The  
Gospel of Self*.

## Chapter Eight: The Evil, 1981 to 2012, America

As an earthquake can reverse the course of a river, or explosives can tunnel through miles of unyielding mountain, so a single book has the power to change the whole course of a man's life – and through that man, all history – by setting his feet onto paths he would never have discovered on his own. For Terry Oglesby, that life-changing book was Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead*, and later, *Atlas Shrugged*.

For Tim Rankin, it was *The Gospel of Self*.

*On the level of experience, every one of us is bound by the limitations of our human bodies. Our every thought about the world is therefore a rumination on what we perceive with our personal eyes, ears, nose or tongue, the touch of our individual fingertips. Each man's experience of reality is unique, personal, and unduplicated in all the world, in all of history. It is not possible for two people to ever have exactly the same experience of the world.*

*And yet, reality, the world over, is the same for everyone. I do not pick an apple that becomes a pear in your hand. I look up into the night sky and see the moon and the stars, and that's what you see, too, irrespective of our individual beliefs, desires or expectations. How is that possible?*

*As philosopher Ayn Rand proved, this is true because the outside world is objectively real, independent of our human*

*perceptions of or feelings about it. We do not create reality; we can only discover it. And what we discover is the same for everyone because it is "really real", out there beyond our senses. It exists, just as it is, before we are born, and it will continue to exist, unchanged, when we die. No desire on our part can alter that reality.*

*To Ayn Rand's inarguable material observation, I add this spiritual Truth revealed to me by God Him/Her/Itself – an epiphany that completes Ms. Rand's vision and ushers in a New Objectivism with the power to transform the world:*

*Just as the outside world is a single objective reality that can only be discovered by the wielder of human senses, so every discoverer looking out through those human eyes is also one in an equally objective measure. Underlying the illusion of billions of separate human "persons" populating the world, there is in reality only one true human Self (or "Meta-Self" or "Super Self," perhaps) that is every bit as tangible, universal, singular and "discoverable" as the "outside world." There are billions of human beings currently sharing the earth, but only one Self – a Self that existed before any of us were born, and which is in no way impacted by our physical deaths. Just as each person experiences reality differently without effecting the objective, self-existing nature of the "real world," so billions of people experiencing themselves, interiorly, as individuals who are born, live their lives, and one day die, does not in any way undermine the objective reality of the Universal Self that pre-exists and survives us all, and*

*within which every human person lives and moves and has their being.*

*"My world," "my self," and even "my life" are illusions born of the limitations imposed by our existence in separate physical human bodies. But the "individuality" every human being experiences as "I," "me," "myself," is not what it appears to be. Each of us is, in reality, nothing less than a crossroads where Universal Self and the Universe Itself meet and intermingle in an ecstatic union of mutual discovery.*

*What I call "me," and what you call "you," are objectively one and the same thing – the most important thing that exists or ever could exist in all of Space, Time, and Eternity.*

*Universal Self is God, and the Universe itself, in its objective material existence beyond the limitation of our human senses, is God as well.*

*Where God meets God, where God discovers God, where God unites with God, the result can only be more God.*

*You are the place where God meets to discover Himself.*

*You are the meeting, itself.*

*You are God playfully creating more God.*

*You are God.*



-- The Gospel of Self, Sutra I.

While *The Gospel of Self* had its dry moments, once the metaphors started flying, Ātma pyāra had a real gift for making the human condition sound like a cosmic spiritual orgy – one where God actually wants us to have a good time – penetrating a material realm atremble with desire to be touched and shaped and molded into the fruition of every man's personal ambitions and pleasures. It solved the contentious "problem of evil" by dismissing the basic premise on which the argument is traditionally based:

*Philosophers ask:*

*"If God is both all good and all powerful, how can there be evil in the world? If God creates or even tolerates evil, then he must not be all good. Or perhaps God is good, but he is unable to stop evil things from happening, in which case he is not all powerful."*

*The atheist answers that because evil can be seen to exist in the world, God must not exist.*

*Theologians spin arcane theorems whereby an all good God "allows" evil in the service of a higher good, an argument that amounts to little more than the relabeling of "evil" as "higher good," which does not solve the moral conundrum, and which therefore begs the question.*

*Religious mystics play the "mystery card" and refuse to pose any answer, offering instead dodges like, "No need to think about that now. We'll all know the answer someday in heaven."*

*This only proves philosophers on all sides of the question have no understanding of God.*

*When human beings use the terms Good and Evil, they are invariably referring, not to any objectively existing property of reality, but to behaviors, "acts" of good or evil, and among those, exclusively acts performed by human beings.*

*No one labels a lion "evil" for bringing down an antelope, or "good" for feeding the meat to its young. The human concept of morality does not apply to the actions of animals. Whatever the lion does, it is simply being a lion.*

*In exactly this sense, God is not capable of doing anything other than being God. Good and Evil do not exist in either the objective outside world, or within Universal Self, so these terms simply cannot be applied to God.*

*And since you are God, they cannot be applied to you, either.*

*It's time for Humanity to grow up and get on with being God.*

*Let's retire our labels. Good and Evil are obsolete.*

*YOU ARE WHAT GOD IS DOING! Start acting like it!*

-- The Gospel of Self, Sutra I

When *The Gospel of Self* was published in early 1981, Tim Rankin was twelve years old, and his mom was still alive. To his knowledge, she never read the book, though her hippie lifestyle suggested she'd have resonated with its message of the pursuit of personal pleasure as life's highest virtue. Someone in California mailed the book to her, but she was mostly into marijuana and TV talk shows right then, so it found swift unread passage to the bookshelf, where Tim found it a year later while packing to move in with the Boyles.

And *The Gospel of Self* saved his life. What could have been a life-crushing tragedy, the teenage loss of the only parent a boy has ever known, became, instead, a chrysalis of transformation.

The answers were all right there. Why had his mother died? Because she was driving recklessly. Why would she do that? Because she was high, and she experienced great pleasure from smoking pot. Or maybe she was rushing to make a major drug purchase, what with \$40,000 in the car, and all. She would have been very excited about that. Or maybe she'd just made a big drug sale, and was so happy about all that money and the pleasure it could buy her that she lost control of her vehicle. It didn't matter

which scenario was true. No matter how you spun it, Peacedove died in hot pursuit of what she perceived to be her own happiness.

In death, as in life, Mom was being true to her God-self. And that's the best possible thing she could have been doing. At thirteen, Timothy Lovechild Rankin really thought all of this through, in just these terms, guided to a sense of acceptance and inner piece by daily reading and rereading of *The Gospel of Self*. He wrote a long and sincere fan letter to Ātma pyāra and mailed it in care of the publisher. He never received a reply, but that was okay. The Guru was just being God. Tim Rankin had plenty of his own divine business to attend to, so he rolled up his metaphorical sleeves and got busy remaking his life.

\* \* \* \*

On Independence Day, 2012, when the email from Ātma pyāra at the Paramātmā svaya ashram in India landed in his in-box, the adult Tim Rankin's first impression was that it must be a joke.

By the time *The Gospel of Self* was released in 1981, Paramātmā svaya had already closed its doors, and a steady stream of disgruntled rock stars, actors and other vacuous spiritual vultures had descended to publicly rend its remains on the TV news, tearing at the good Swami's reputation with lurid tales of debauchery, drugs and exploitation on the ashram.

Those stories initially boosted book sales, then killed them off when no one could be reached for comment, no titillating photos surfaced, and no caches of guns or fleets of Rolls Royces turned up to keep the public eye riveted. By Christmas, even the *Where Are They Now?* segments had tired of the story.

So the email, thirty-one years later, struck him on his second impression as almost a paranormal event, rather than a comedic one – like watching the planchette move of its own accord across a Ouija board. Like a ghost springing up out of nowhere and shouting *boo*.

He did not open the email until he had worked thoroughly through his much more sensible third impression, which was that three decades added to what he knew of Swami Ātma's age when Paramātmā svaya closed would put him somewhere in his seventies, a perfectly reasonable age for him to still be alive out there somewhere.

He clicked the link.

*Hello, Timothy Lovechild Rankin!* the message began. It was more of a note, really, just three lines of text:

*Thank you for your letter. Sorry it took me so long to reply.*

*I won't kid you, Tim, I know you're a billionaire. That's why I'm writing to you.*

*It is time to transform the world. I need your help.*

Twenty-eight days later, *Maium Hum* met the man whose philosophy had saved his life on the tarmac of the Varanasi Airport, near the sacred Ganges River in India. It was time to repay the favor.

## Chapter Nine: The Evil, 2012 - India

His Divine Grace, Swami Ātma pyāra, seventy-four years old and dying of prostate cancer, brought no one but a driver with him to the airport, and refused to waste time on common niceties like getting out of the vehicle to shake Tim Rankin's hand or introduce himself.

"Put your bags in the trunk – Then get in here!" the Swami growled from the back of his maroon Maruti Alto as the car pulled up on the runway, the tinted back seat passenger side window at half-mast.

Tim Rankin did as he was told. He'd only brought a single carry-on bag, taking seriously the vow he knew was coming, to renounce the world, though he figured even a full time Sadhu needs his own toothbrush and a few changes of underwear. He skipped the trunk and slid in next to the now elderly Ātma pyāra, wedging the bag between himself and the door as he pulled it shut with a click. The driver closed the empty trunk and retook his position behind the wheel.

"Drive!" And the car veered a wild slow figure eight through the assemblage of people still disembarking from the plane, and made its way back onto the main road out of the airport.

"*Maium Hum*," Tim said, introducing himself, then, feeling foolish, added, "Tim Rankin."

"I know," the Swami said, a low growl still rumbling around the edges of his words. "I'm sorry, Tim." He waved with both hands over the orange robe that covered his lap and legs, swooshing downward. "Everything from here down hurts like a son of a bitch. It makes me cranky. I'm dying, and that makes me cranky, too. Don't take it personally."

The billionaire-turned-monk simply nodded and said nothing.

"Good. Now listen."

And just like that, without so much as a *How was your trip?*, the divinely inspired author of *The Gospel of Self* laid out the plan by which Tim Rankin and his riches were going to usher in the Age of Aquarius.

\* \* \* \*

Chōtā dēvatā, or "Little Godling," whose birth certificate bears the strategically American name Michael Oglesby, was born April 1st, 1981 to Terry and Bethany Oglesby, more popularly known as Ātma pyāra and his woman Starfire. The Swami began the boy's story stressing that little *Cho-cho* (which sounded like "Jo-Jo" on his lips) was not his natural child. In fact, no human father had been



involved in the child's conception. His mother had been a celibate nun cloistered in prayer and self-service at the ashram. When the baby simply appeared one day in her virginal womb, one of those signature feats only God and certain starfish can pull off, it was clear that something very special was taking place. A *Dēvadūta*, or angelic messenger, appeared to Ātma pyāra in a dream to anoint him the baby's earthly stepfather and provider and protector, and he threw himself unreservedly into the role, sending all the lucrative but distracting hangers-on packing and sealing the ashram like a fortress around the new Holy Family – himself, Starfire, and by April, baby Cho-cho. *The Gospel of Self* had been written for love of the baby while he was still in the womb. God inspired every word, as a manual for the right instruction of Cho-cho's unfolding human psyche, and a roadmap to his adult integration with the divine God-nature that had sparked his very existence.

But the new family was shattered just a few months later, when a hemorrhagic fever epidemic sweeping Delhi stretched a skeletal finger all the way south and east to Varanasi. For all their barriers to the outside world, the fever found them, and Starfire took ill. On her deathbed, she begged Ātma to remain forever faithful to her little godling, and to devote his life to preparing the boy to meet his cosmic destiny. Her final living act had been to marry Ātma, granting him

both the legal and moral authority to control the child's upbringing.

Ātma pyāra's book took Starfire's place in the Holy Triad, becoming the boy's mother, his teacher, his school, his brothers and sisters, his closest companion. With millions still in the bank from the heyday of the ashram's success, the Swami felt no pressure to get back to business, so the next thirty years passed in a beam of razor focus intensity, just him and the boy and the book. The spiritual giant Chōtā dēvatā became under that lens was in every way a fulfillment of *The Gospel of Self*. He *was* God, and any man admitted to his presence found his own God-nature awakened and set ablaze. He could answer any question. He could heal with a touch. He had supernatural knowledge of everything happening everywhere at once – and not just what people were doing, but their deepest secret motivations and dreams and aspirations, as well. He was Truth incarnate, and nothing could be hidden from him.

Chōtā dēvatā was exactly what the world needed. A savior. A model. A teacher. A leader without fear or equal in all the world. God's miraculously begotten son, Ātma pyāra's stepchild and spiritual protégée, became, in his fullness, God's gift of enlightenment to the world.

And His Divine Grace, Swami Ātma pyāra was going to die before that gift could be delivered. Within

hours of the first cancer cells swimming to sick life in his prostate, Cho-cho had informed his step-father that the end was near. With no trace of emotion, staring off as if reading a headline over the shoulder of a distant stranger, the grown Chōtā dēvatā told him the exact date and hour of his death – Sunday, August 5th, 2:29 AM – and warned him not to bother chasing doctors to ward off the inevitable. No treatment could help. His death was ordained. A throne had been prepared for him in the afterlife, and it was time to ascend.

Ātma pyāra bristled at the pronouncement of such a self-sacrificial fate. It was unnatural and grossly unjust. "You could cure me."

"I could," Cho-cho answered. "But that is not ordained."

"I'm your father," Ātma said. "I command you to heal me, right now."

"I'm sorry. I love you, I do. But God does not want you cured."

"God wants me dead."

"Not exactly. But that's how it's going to play out in the physical realm. I'm sorry."

Silence, then Ātma said, "So what's next?"

Cho-cho retrieved a folded letter from inside his kurta and handed it to his dying father.

"Timothy Rankin is next," he said.

\* \* \* \*

"So that's where you come in," the Swami finished. The car was just passing through the iron gates of the ashram, which closed with a motorized hum behind the vehicle. "And don't take that Age of Aquarius crap seriously, Tim. My wife was an astrologer. She talked that way, so I picked up the habit. But what I'm telling you has nothing to do with crystals or channeled beings or any of that New Age bullshit. It's time to usher in a new objective order on earth. It's time for you to make that happen."

"Me."

"You and Cho-cho. I want you to take him to America. The next phase happens there."

"The next phase?"

"I'll be dead in less than three days. Tim, you have to take the ball from here. Run for the goalpost. God has ordained it. You are God, so you have no choice."

"You said Cho-cho was God."

Silence.

"What's the next phase?"

"Cho-cho is thirty-one. He still has a few years before he can run for President in the US. Use that time to buy him a place in one of the Parties, maybe a senate seat. Build his political resume. He'll need an American birth certificate."

"Seriously?"

"It'll be expensive, but it won't be hard. He's irresistible. Charisma isn't even the word for it. You'll see what I mean when you meet him in a few minutes. Once the world gets a look at him, you won't have to buy him the White House, Tim. They'll beg him to take it."

\* \* \* \*

All of Tim Rankin's thoughts over the next half hour, as the car was parked and they made their torturous way, considering the old man's condition, up a dozen stone steps to the main house, then zigzag down several long hallways as they journeyed toward the meditation hall where Chōtā dēvatā waited to be met, amounted to some version of *This is not what I bargained for...* He expected to turn a corner into the great room to find Cho-cho on stage, levitating in a full lotus position, beams of light firing from his hands. He cynically envisioned an inverted top hat on

the stage beside him, white bunny ears poking tentatively over the brim...

"*Maium Hum*, welcome," Chōtā dēvatā said, smiling, as their next turn indeed revealed a meditation hall the size of an airline hangar, capable of seating at least two hundred seekers. Cho-cho was alone in the room, standing near the door they entered through. There was nothing pretentious about him. "Tim Rankin. All the way from America. Thank you for coming."

He extended a hand, and Tim took it. In the space of one firm, American handshake, Tim Rankin's head exploded.

And his next thought was, *So this is how it feels to be God...*

It was the strangest sensation. In one second he had already expanded beyond the boundaries of the earth and was flying free amongst the stars. Not flying, though. Expanding. Maybe *inflating* was a better term, the way a balloon gets bigger in every direction at once as it fills with air. But what was pushing him ever outward from some mysterious center was not air, it was God, and the space he was expanding into was also God, as was that unseen center point. None of it made sense, but it was visually stunning, as clusters of stars and whirling pinwheel galaxies and towering pillars of hot glowing gas zoomed closer from their distance only to vanish sacrificially into his

ever-growing glory like drops of water chasing oblivion into a sponge...

And just like that, he was once again standing in the vast, echoing chamber of the ashram meditation hall, shaking hands with a strikingly unassuming Chōtā dēvatā.

"I..." There simply were no words.

"Call me Michael," said the God-man, smiling, even bowing a little. He was still holding Tim Rankin's trembling hand. "Starting today, I answer only to my American name."

## **Chapter Ten: The Evil, 2012 to 2025, America**

They started in Chicago, Tim Rankin's old stomping grounds, and the beating heart of Illinois politics for anyone with ambitions toward national office. All Tim had to do was introduce the suave and excruciatingly handsome young man around, take him to the right parties, let him shake a few important hands, and, as if in the grips of an irresistible spell, the city's power brokers wasted no time in granting him favors, opening doors, and making available opportunities others had worked whole lifetimes for a shot at and never got.

The ink was barely dry on the US birth certificate Tim acquired for Michael, when the Illinois governor called a special primary to fill a vacant State Senate seat, and Tim threw Michael's hat in the ring. One team of clever and well-financed lawyers later, his three challengers were all disqualified on technicalities, and, running unopposed, the nomination was his. Being a Democrat in Chicago, the general election fell into his lap as well, and, with an ease that would have raised eyebrows anywhere but the Windy City, Michael Oglesby, whose feet had been on US soil barely thirty days, was already a rising political star.

And his star kept rising. Less than a year into Michael's State Senate term, terrorists fired an explosive round into a DC taxi cab carrying US



Senator Floyd Bennett and his wife, and within days Michael had been appointed to fill the vacant Federal seat. He won easy reelection the following year, and, in his first full term in the US senate, made a name for himself as an advocate for the poor and a champion of women's reproductive rights. He created an uproar as the keynote speaker at the 2016 Democratic National Convention, selling his personal vision for the future of America as if he were the nominee, and Jack Marshfield, the party's actual choice for President that year, was just his yes man.

Four years later, when both President Marshfield and Vice President Stansen were assassinated in separate terrorist bombings within weeks of the 2020 Democratic primary, Michael Oglesby was the only living person with his name on the ballot. No other Democrat had dared run against the popular incumbent. Tim Rankin bought his protégée airtime on every TV in America, and in a speech media outlets ranked in real time alongside Lincoln's *Gettysburg Address* and King's *I have a Dream* speech, Michael cast his spell over a grieving nation, vowing, if made President, to preserve and build upon President Marshfield's popular social programs, while hawkishly taking the fight to the newly formed Alliance of Islamic States, who were universally blamed for the President's murder, and who had just announced significant restrictions on oil exports to the US.

Republicans argued that another four years of Marshfield's Socialist domestic policies plus a major new overseas war would bankrupt the country. Tim Rankin didn't have to spend a dime getting the GOP candidate, Jim Rush, branded a "camel-hugging coward" – his own party pinned that label on him when their convention approved a platform balancing a "New Isolationism," which even conservative pundits quickly relabeled the *"bury our head in Arabian sands"* policy, with a call for corporate and capital gains tax cuts, paid for by the gutting of popular cash welfare and Medicaid programs. The New York Post headline read REPUBLICAN CONVENTION DRAFTS SUICIDE PACT, and that was pretty much that. Michael Oglesby's landslide win in November made history when he became the first US President since George Washington to secure an electoral margin of one hundred percent.

\* \* \* \*

The White House secured, Tim Rankin returned, secretly, to Arkady.

The day he first shook Cho-cho's hand back at the ashram, a process of physical as well as spiritual transformation had begun for him that he knew he would never be able to explain to Jessica. It wasn't that she wouldn't or couldn't understand, though she probably wouldn't. Or couldn't. The main difficulty lay in speaking to her at all, the actual physical act of

talking. If she was like everybody else he tried to share anything with these days – except, of course, Michael – she would look right through him, perhaps noting a faint shimmer in the light painting the wall behind him, turning her ear when he called out to her as if stretching to decipher the rustle of distant whispering on the wind. It was as if, since the day his consciousness had so effusely expanded at the mere touch of Michael's hand, his whole body was following, in slow, daily less and less corporeal motion. Every day he felt the molecules of his body expanding like stars across a galaxy, inflating like the universe, the dark spaces between them growing ever more expansive until even he had begun to experience himself more as a thinking, feeling cloud than a human being.

He was becoming a *vapor*, an antique word for ghost, and it seemed the more *vaporous* he became, the less the present moment mattered. The past was more solid, more easily clung to, so he allowed a deep, unsatisfied yearning for his mother and for the innocence of a childhood in Arkady cut off too soon to draw him home.

On the night wall of chimney smoke blanketing the town he found the sweet scent of Jessica and little Marion, the boy not so little anymore, and he followed it to them. With a sigh like weeping, he joined the walls of the mansion whose title once bore his name, passing like fog between its molecules of

wood and stone and glass, fixing himself around the sleeping woman and the boy like a fortress to protect and love them with whatever life he had left, for however long he might last.

\* \* \* \*

Michael Oglesby no longer had need of Tim Rankin or his money. He now had the full faith and credit of the United States government at his disposal, and he used it to remake the world.

Much has been written about the US/Islamic Alliance War of 2021 to 2024, but that conflict's most interesting and historically significant dimension, and the only one that really matters for this narrative, is that it was, from its very inception, a complex double-cross.

You could say the Muslims started it. That's certainly how the history books present the case, but then again, history can't help but enshrine the viewpoint of the victor. It's true that the dramatic escalation of terrorist events on US soil that began the day Michael Oglesby was sworn in on Inauguration Day, 2021 could be seen as a simple expansion of hostilities initiated by the Muslim world on September 11th, 2001, when terrorist destroyed the World Trade Center in New York. Again, that is certainly how every history textbook in every school everywhere on earth tells the story now.

But there's also a case to be made that the war was largely about America's dependence on foreign oil, and it's willingness to exact previously unimagined scales of carnage in the service of that addiction.

More conspiracy-minded dissenters to the textbook view of history suggest that neither the energy needs of the US and its allies, nor religion – Muslim, Christian or Jewish – were ever anything more than props in the hands of a tiny number of super-rich families connected on a level beyond any nation or system of belief. Seen through this lens, the war was essentially a business transaction whereby the overwhelming force of the US military was used to wrest world petroleum supplies out of Arabic hands in order to pour them into the deep, deep pockets of America's ultra-rich European sponsors.

But the truth that no one but President Oglesby and the ghost of Tim Rankin have ever understood is that Michael's decisions concerning the US/IA War were never in the least motivated by the mundane allure of money, or power, or energy, or even religion – at least not in the common early 2020s understanding of that term.

Michael Oglesby was on a mission from God. He *was* God, and he had been blessed from birth with the divine knowledge that, while individual human beings fear their own physical death and mourn the loss of wives and husbands and sons and daughters

and parents, their tears fall in vain service to an illusion. The life or death of one person – or a thousand people, or a million, or even a billion – is as nothing to Universal Self, which pre-exists all their births and is unmoved by their deaths. Like drops of rain falling on the sea, every human at death is simply absorbed back into the cosmic ocean of Self, and only the false belief that something unique ever existed in the first place, or could ever be lost, causes pain among the living. It's not death that hurts, it's clinging to the illusion of life as possession rather than process. To finally rip away the Band-Aid of personal ego to reveal Universal Self and set Humanity free would require death on such a massive scale that not a single living human being anywhere on earth could be unaffected by it. The loss had to be collective, universal. If all Humanity could be led into shock and mourning as one, in that radical moment of global, broken-hearted opening, *The Gospel of Self* could sweep in to dry every tear with Truth, and replace every illusion with an objective vision of material and spiritual reality.

It was a beautiful ambition Michael nurtured secretly in his heart as he laid the real-world groundwork for its realization.

For most of four years, he led the Muslims to believe they could win. He feigned indecision, taking out the occasional Alliance leader with an unmanned drone strike, but failing to put boots on any ground,

anywhere. Alliance operatives captured on US soil were tried as criminals in American courts, with implied Constitutional rights. When rumors started that Michael was, himself, a secret Muslim, he leaked turbaned photos from his childhood in India to the Press, then vehemently denounced them as fakes. In secret correspondence with IA Imams, he sent assurances that America had nothing but respect for Muslim culture, had no stomach for war, and wanted only a diplomatic solution to the crisis.

By Independence Day, 2024, more than one million Americans had died in terrorist bombings, nerve gas releases, dirty bomb explosions, and a series of nuclear reactor detonations that killed or sickened people in 17 states. All US nuclear power stations had to be shut down to break the chain of successful bombings, leaving more than sixty million homes in the dark. Congress approved a blank check authorization to wage war on the Alliance. A few small scale strikes were launched, but nothing substantial or effective.

By mid-October, 2024, the outcry of the American people to *make it stop* had reached exactly the pitch of desperation he had been waiting for. Just two weeks before Election Day, with one stroke of the ceremonial pen, President Michael Oglesby unleashed the full force and fury of the United States military on an Islamic world that had been led, like a kitten to a bowl of milk, to grossly underestimate its adversary.

President Oglesby signed the order authorizing nuclear strikes at Noon sharp, then retired alone to his chambers to enjoy his lunch. By 3:00 PM, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Egypt and Lebanon had been leveled to flat plains of radioactive rubble. Before vanishing beneath a field of mushroom clouds, Iran managed to fire more than half its secret arsenal of short range nuclear missiles toward Israel, and that nation was gone now, as well, along with the Palestinians.

The American attacks galvanized the Islamic world, and soon Turkey, Nigeria, Libya, Pakistan and Indonesia had fallen in behind their Muslim brothers. By dinner, those nations were no more.

Russia, China, India, Great Britain, and Germany, as if by prior arrangement, employed their armies not in battling the Americans, but in rounding up and imprisoning their own Muslim populations, to be dealt with after the radiation had settled and the new global lines of power were distinguishable. The rest of liberal Europe reluctantly followed suit.

Election Day never came. In the wake of America's bloody vengeance, more than half a billion people were dead across Asia, the Middle East and Africa, with millions more likely to follow in the coming weeks from radiation sickness, starvation, poisoned water, and the collapse of critical infrastructure. President Oglesby first delayed the 2024 US elections



until December, then, cancelled them altogether. He declared Martial Law, and simply stayed in office.

On New Year's Day, 2025, President Michael Oglesby addressed the nation, and the world, in these words:

*My Fellow Americans. Citizens of the World.*

*For too long, the world has suffered in the shadow of a handful of cowardly nations for whom brutal acts of terror against innocent civilians came to define not only their politics, but their religion, as well. Today marks not just the beginning of a New Year, but of a new era in the history of the human race. Those who sought to control us through intimidation, through the imposition of crippling fear and the unpredictable disruption of our lives and security through violence, are dead – by the hundreds of millions, dead. Their scourge has been erased from the earth. We are free.*

*I know the temptation to do so is strong in the wake of recent events, but we must not allow either our fear or our relief to mislead us into blaming Islam alone for what has occurred.*

*Experts tell us that terrorism as an ideology is the exclusive domain of no one religion. It is, rather, a strategy that has always been and will continue to be embraced by religious fanatics of all traditions.*

*Islam is not the enemy. Religion is the enemy. Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism... Name your "ism" – all organized religions bear within them the seeds of fanaticism, because they are all based on irrational assumptions about the world around us – and the world within us. And what is irrational will always and inevitably cause men and women of otherwise sound mind to make unreasonable choices.*

*We will only be forever free from the shadow of terrorism when we free ourselves once and for all from the psychic plague of irrational beliefs and behaviors – starting with the established world religions and everything connected with them. From this day forward, only reason can be trusted to lead us to peace and prosperity. From this day forward, all the temples built to blind, mad gods of the imagination must be torn down, and in their place erected an eternal monument to the rational mind of Man.*

*Many of you are familiar with the writings of the Russian turned American philosopher Ayn Rand...*

And somehow, he did not bore them. Not a single man listening, anywhere on the earth, felt talked down to or patronized. Not one found his exposition puzzling. Or insulting. Or threatening. An astronaut floating in orbit, watching President Oglesby's address unfold from space, might have witnessed a smoky, gray fog pouring out of the Oval Office windows, spreading outward to blanket the states, growing thicker and blacker with each expanding

word, swelling to engulf all of North and South America, crossing the oceans in both directions at once, consuming Africa, Europe, India, Russia, China, until it met its own incantational tail somewhere over the Pacific, where the seam wrapped around itself and snapped closed like an angry fist, like a great, gloved hand squeezing the whole earth tight in its inexorable grip.

Within weeks, *The Gospel of Self* was the best-selling book of all time.

## **Chapter Eleven: The Evil, 2020 to 2066 - Arkady**

If God existed, Marion Francis Rankin would hate the all-powerful son of a bitch for all he was worth. But God did not exist, at least not in the way people thought he did when Marion was a child, before President Oglesby secured Mankind's freedom from the irrational and the whole world changed. Now people knew better, and there was no capital to be gained from investing emotion, good, bad or indifferent, in an impossibility. The world without God judged men objectively, measuring their worth not according to wealth, or social class, or skin color, or degree of education, but solely by the weight of the choices each man or woman made in life, and the elbow grease each was willing to put behind those choices.

*The Gospel of Self* offered every man what he needed most – absolute autonomy, and both the natural right and the inalienable responsibility to be his own god and steer his own course through life. Men who stepped up to that challenge and thrived by their own direction and hard work deserved every laurel with which the world crowned them – money, power, property, prestige, all the tangible rewards of material success. To those who backed away from the challenge of their human divinity, giving in to weakness, self-doubt, infirmity or sloth, the godless world meted out equal justice in the form of poverty,

illness, addiction, wage slavery. In the absence of any god other than Man himself, the illusion of injustice vanished. When each man bears sole responsibility for the creation of his own life, his circumstances, moment by moment, can never be anything other than exactly what he deserves.

*The Gospel of Self* taught that the Ideal Man was self-made, self-supporting, self-educated in the sense that he aggressively searches out, grasps and shapes information to serve his own purposes, self-developed, having honed his every natural talent into a capitalizable skill, and cosmically self-realized as a fully conscious node of Universal Self staking claim to the treasure house that was the material world.

Becoming *The Gospel's* Ideal Man was Marion Rankin's life goal, and he had not allowed his privileged birth into a wealthy family to limit his ambition or reduce him to sloth. He had not given in to the seduction of the undemanding life that was his mother's, a has-been pop star his father had left so wealthy she never had to even think about working, a life that could easily have been his. She would have just handed it to him. As it was, he controlled the mansion and estate, so long as he ensured that Mom, inhabiting her third floor chambers, had every need met, and he stood to inherit everything when her tiny drop of self returned someday to the great cosmic ocean. By the time that day came, he would have proven himself truly worthy of such a vast fortune –

as every Ideal Man deserves all of the best things human life has to offer.

But even in his efforts to exemplify the Human Ideal, Marion Rankin walked a unique, some might still say privileged, path that went beyond the mere happenstance of material wealth. He possessed a spiritual inheritance, as well. Unlike other men, he had his own personal daemon, a private spirit-teacher, an invisible guardian angel expert in the ways of Universal Self who marked the path before him as he journeyed toward what only he and the daemon knew was his personal cosmic destiny. His daemon was the ghost of the father he had never known, and the arrival of Tim Rankin's spectral presence in their home, when Marion was just ten years old, had marked the first of several turning points, for Marion Rankin and for the world.

\* \* \* \*

A single word – *S O N* – was the first indication ten year old Marion received that his father had returned from the grave. Eight years abandoned, the boy had no memory of his father at all, no face to associate with the word *dad*. He could not have recognized the tremulous voice emanating from every shapeless, gray wall of the dream as his father's, and yet he did. The dream was rain, and night, and more rain, and nothing but water pouring out of a gray sky in gray sheets that disappeared into the gray ground below. It

was the opposite of color, a metaphor of misery that only a child on the verge of exploding into life can feel, waiting and wanting for the adventure to begin...

S O N.

It was barely a whisper, but it came from everywhere and ran all the bones of his body at once like lightning down a flagpole, and he fell to the ground and shook and could not say a word. And the rain poured down. And he could see the sky now, lightning leaping between clouds and waking up the world, and he thought *I'm here I'm here I'm here!*

And then he was awake, right there in his own bed. And he was crying. And it was raining hard outside, one of those freezing Midwest February rains where every third drop is ice that grows in white mounds on the window sill.

And there was the word.

S O N.

It was written in the condensation on his bedroom window, just as plainly as if he'd crossed the room and painted it with his own finger.

S O N.

"Dad," he whispered into the darkness, and a great peal of thunder rattled the glass of the window and

shook loose a hundred clinging drops that ran down and erased what he was sure he had seen there.

S O N.

It had been written on the inside of the window, the letters pointing the right direction to be read without a mirror. His father was letting him know he was inside the house, not outside seeking entry like some vampire.

His mother assured him that his father was not dead, just missing. If he was dead, someone would have contacted her. But pretty soon she was feeling his presence in the house, too, which left her increasingly wistful and tired from dreams that wouldn't let her sleep. Her sometimes live-in boyfriend, Jeff, stormed out after an impossible slip of the knife in the kitchen left him bleeding and shouting about too many accidents and he was getting out while he still could.

Jessica didn't stop him. Tim was home.

When Marion was fourteen, half a billion people died, and he was the only kid on earth who knew it was going to happen. Dad told him. His mother stayed in bed for days, staring dark-eyed at the TV, so it was clear she had not received warning. But Marion was ready to put now four years of dream academy training to the test, and for the handful of hours it took the lion's share of those spirits to be separated



from their bodies, he sat cross-legged on his bed, eyes closed in quiet meditation, hoping to glimpse or at least feel the flood of selves like drops of rain pouring in every direction from the material realm and back into their Universal source. He saw and felt nothing, but he imagined in great detail what he thought the deluge might look like once he'd grown spiritual eyes capable of seeing such things, and that's when the ghost of his father gave him the prophecy.

What he had been learning from his father, night after night as he slept, had a name – *The Gospel of Self*. President Oglesby was that Gospel's avatar, and he was in the process, with this war, of saving the world from its own irrationality. Soon, all religion except *The Gospel of Self* would be outlawed, and in a single generation, forgotten by the whole world. Most of that portion of the prophecy was fulfilled by January.

The next part would take decades to unfold. Unreason would refuse to die. Like a bird with two wings broken, the wounded heart of the old irrationality would tumble out of the sky and crash land in Arkady. Children would find it, nurse it to life, feed it with their naïve' imaginations. It would tell them a story, a sick inversion of the truth that would poison them to reason, a story that would spread amongst their kind like a contagion. The old madness would use children to re-establish itself in the world.

That was actually the end of the prophecy. Unreason wins. Universal Self is forgotten. Superstition once again rules the world. A new Dark Age begins. Tim Rankin could clearly see that future from his otherworldly vantage point.

But he didn't like it. From where he existed, hovering somewhere between life and death, he could almost see an option, just the shiny distant glint of a suggestion that the story might end differently if a few key elements could be redirected. If even one or two sharp right turns in the timeline could be forced left instead, unreason might not win the day. The course of the future could be changed. *The Gospel of Self's* victory in the present might be secured for all eternity.

It was worth a shot. Together, father and son made a plan.

\* \* \* \*

And that's how Marion Francis Rankin, heir to his mother's millions and his father's billions, likely future business mogul, or high-powered lawyer, or political power-broker, found himself, instead, at the ripe middle age of fifty-five, celebrating his twenty-fifth anniversary as Principal of the Arkady R1 Combined Elementary and Middle Schools. He – and the seemingly omniscient ghost of his father, plus a US President-for-life, born and raised in a foreign

country, who all three were certain was God incarnate  
– needed access to the children.

### **Part III: Trial by Fire, 2066**

*Many shall be refined,  
purified, and tested,  
but the wicked  
shall prove wicked;  
the wicked shall have  
no understanding,  
but those with insight shall.*

Daniel 12:10

New American Bible

## Chapter Twelve: The Seed of Light

"You know how this works." Vice-Principal Dennis Hale leaned forward and folded his hands together on the desk before him. "If I refer this on to Principal Rankin, he'll send it to the school board, and they'll recommend reeducation. They always do."

John Harper sat across from the big desk in a pink plastic chair far too small for his height, elbows on knees, eyes on the floor. The child beside him balanced her tiny weight on a chair of pale turquoise, hair curling down around sharp blue eyes that stared without blinking into Mr. Hale's face.

"That's crazy, Dennis. She's eight years old."

"The age of reason. She's culpable now. If you can't redirect her, the State will." Then after a pause, "Listen, we've both been down this road. We of all people should know to keep our kids clear of this stuff. Nelly's got to be corrected, for her own good, and right away. Don't let things get out of control."

John Harper found himself holding his breath. Nelly pushed her bangs nervously to one side but continued to stare at Principal Hale. She was neither smiling nor frowning. The big white clock ticked.

"I'll take care of it, Dennis. Don't worry. This ends today."

"Daddy..." Nelly started.

"*Tsh! Tsh!*" he hushed her. "Not a word."

The girl hung her head at last.

"Take her home, John," the Vice-Principal said. "Make her understand what could happen to her, to your family."

"Daddy?"

Both men ignored her.

"This ends today," John Harper repeated, as much a command to his daughter as reassurance to Mr. Hale.

Now that Nelly was in tears, Dennis Hale felt finally free to relax and lean back into the chair.

"I'm with you on this," he said. "Yanking eight year olds is crazy. Rankin gets crazier every year..."

He flashed a big, artificial smile at Nelly, then looked back to John.

"You didn't hear that from me, but feel free to spread it around. I'm not the only one who thinks he's lost it a little. He's got to retire soon, Harper, then I'll be in charge. When I'm the boss, thing will change, you can count on it. No more *Mr. Vice-Guy*..."

He sounded serious, so John did not laugh.

"You'll make a great Principal, Dennis," he said, then, "Thank you, really. I appreciate your bending the rules for an old friend. Consider Nelly cured."

"Awesome. Thank you, John."

The grown man and the little girl walked side by side in silence to the car.

\* \* \* \*

Nelly's tears dried up as soon as the engine growled to life and the car was in motion. Now she was definitely frowning.

"He's a liar," she said as if that explained everything.

"Were you telling the story to first graders?"

"Yes."

"Then Mr. Hale is not a liar. That's what he said you were doing. And you know it's against the rules."

"He's a liar because he says the story isn't true. But it is true."

"You can't tell the story at school, or anywhere else for that matter. You can't tell other kids it's true, or even that *you* think it's true. They'll lock you up. You

are eight years old. You can't in a million years understand the trouble you could be in, or what could happen to me or your mother if you keep this up. Come on..."

"You know the story's true, Daddy."

"And you used to know not to talk about it in public. If Mr. Rankin had overheard you instead of Mr. Hale, you'd be locked up right now. You'd be a grownup before I saw you again. Holy crap, Nelly..."

When he turned to face the girl, she was staring at him defiantly, her little teeth clenched.

"If anything in this town is truly evil, Nell, it's the Special School," he said, trying for stern but coming off pleading, "and I will not let them send you there. But please! Just stop it with the story. Keep it up and they'll take us all away, and that's the truth."

The girl was facing forward now, staring out the windshield, arms still crossed.

"You love your mother, right?" John Harper said, his tone softening. "You love me?"

Nelly nodded. The tears were back.

"And we love you, baby. More than anything. Let that be enough, okay? There's nothing worth trading for that."



"I know," Nelly whispered, so low he almost didn't hear her. Or had she said *No*?

A Dairy Queen appeared just ahead, at the next light.

"We need ice cream," he said. "Like, now."

"Yeah," Nelly said beside him, unsuccessfully fighting back the beginnings of a smile. "Like, now."

\* \* \* \*

As was his way, Neil Coleman stood perfectly still and silent beside the school's green metal trash dumpster, watching as the child and her father climbed into their vehicle and sped off the parking lot. For a long moment after they were gone, he studied the strange sensation of electricity that danced up and down both of his forearms, making the hairs stand on end. He smoothed them down with two quick swipes, hefted the giant trashcan, wheels and all, over his head, and emptied its contents into the dumpster with a long rustle of mostly dirt and paper. He pushed the trashcan back toward the school, plastic wheels rumbling hollowly before him over the blacktop.

From the window of her Kindergarten classroom, Christy Rankin watched Neil Coleman watching Nelly and John Harper drive away from the school. He was a strange man, that Coleman. The way he

watched people and never talked as he made his janitorial rounds of the building gave her the creeps. He was the only staffer in the whole school who didn't attend church, and she had done her research on that one. Paul Rankin – Principal Rankin's son, and her husband – took a special interest in the unchurched. And since her husband's sole compensation as youth minister at the *Fellowship of Self Church* was a percentage of the Sunday collection plate, she had her own special interest in making sure every pew was filled to capacity, each and every Sunday. Coleman's silent rebuff of her friendly invitation to join the congregation had at first unnerved her, then painted a bright red target on his back in her mind. There was something creepy about him, alright, something elusive she couldn't quite put her finger on, but just give her time. She'd ferret out the truth. She always did. Then he'd be sorry.

\* \* \* \*

That night, after Nelly had been tucked away safely into bed, and John and Anne Harper moved their hands and spoke about her in whispers in the living room, the TV blaring and blurring their words, Nelly dreamed, once again, of *the woman*.

In the dream, Nelly was, herself, a grown woman, who lived with her mother and father in a great Victorian castle of a house, with sky blue walls and a widow's walk facing the sea. The front yard was a

rose garden, in bloom even though it was nighttime, wound with snaking paths, and closed in all around with a white picket fence.

From her rooftop perch she at first thought the woman standing motionless just outside the gate was a beggar whose clothing reflected the moonlight, but then she realized there was no moon; only the stars and their reflection on the sea illuminated the night. *The woman* was her own soft moon, glowing inexplicably in the darkness just beyond the gate. When those slender, white arms rose to beckon the girl, Nelly knew she had an appointment to keep.

She slipped back into her room, out into the hallway, down spiraling stairs to the great front door, then out onto the porch. The scent of roses almost overwhelmed her, the night air was so fragrant and lovely. But she kept on, and when she reached the gate and opened it for the glowing woman, *the woman* turned instead and began to float away from the sea, toward the woods behind the house.

Nelly followed and saw ahead the beginnings of a path. The forest canopy was a blanket that held back the stars, and beyond the path's entrance was the darkest dark Nelly could imagine. Her legs began to tremble and her breath became short as *the woman* slipped onto the path and the darkness swallowed her whole. Nelly gave a little gasp and, gathering her courage, leapt after her into the void.

And up ahead, the glow again. *The woman* stood in a clearing lighted only by her own gentle radiance. Nelly ran to her side.

*Dig*, came the wordless command, though Nelly understood plainly in her mind.

Nelly looked at her own soft, white hands, then down toward the black ground invisible at their feet.

"I can't."

*Dig*, the order came again, more urgent this time.

"Let me wake my father. He'll bring a shovel..."

*The woman* began to fade and disappear.

Nelly screamed, "*Wait!*"

She dropped to her knees and began digging furiously. Great mounds of black earth came up in her hands, and a hole began to grow before her. She looked up and *the woman* was gone. Nelly could feel the teeth of wicked beasts closing in around her, and she dug and dug, tears muddying the dirt in her hands.

Inside the hole, the same strange light that had shone from *the woman*. Nelly tore furiously through layer upon layer of earth until she found her hands cupped around a softly glowing teardrop. She brushed it

clean of dirt and the teardrop burst in her hands. Water that was also somehow light exploded like a geyser into the sky. The stars appeared, visible through the canopy of interwoven branches over her head, and the forest became just a forest again around her. There were no teeth or beasts.

Nelly stood and pressed both hands deep into the pulsing geyser and the dirt beneath her fingernails sparked and vanished up into the sky. The glow traveled up her arms and spread over her body and she laughed and twirled like a dancer in the radiant rain of light, happier than she'd ever imagined possible.

## Chapter Thirteen: The Beginning of the End

Neil Coleman's father drank himself to death two years after Neil was taken for reeducation. The boy wouldn't find out till he graduated six years later, as nobody ever saw or heard from their families while locked away in the Special School. Parents weren't allowed to reach in, and the School only reached out when a kid got into trouble.

And Neil Coleman was no trouble-maker. He loved the Special School for rescuing him from the old man's meanness, and he wouldn't have dreamed of risking that security by making waves. Three hot meals and a shot of hard labor every day was a good time in his book. The School's daily *lessons* were never easy, but they were always fair. Everybody got one. And if you applied yourself, they were always doable. You hit the bed exhausted and woke up stronger the next day. People paid good money for that kind of workout at a gym. Sure, School staff lied constantly and tried to get inside your head all the time, but they were amateurs compared to his dad.

In eight years a child growing up in the Special School, the man Neil Coleman became was born at the crossroads of three vital skills learned in captivity:

The first was a deep understanding of the value of keeping his mouth shut. Only words that must be

spoken ever should be. One word more was just being careless, and carelessness always led to trouble.

Skill two was patience. When you're ten years old and you can see full well that *you ain't going nowhere* for years and years to come, you either go crazy, get sad (the path most kids took), or you set your mind to ride it out and got busy with the business of waiting.

Skill three was a real professional skill that would earn him a living after graduating at eighteen to find the old man dead and himself all alone in the world – the Special School taught him how to fix cars. The School was, after all, a real school, complete with grade three through twelve academic classes, and on the high school level, wood, machine and auto shop. There was a campus fleet of vans and buses to maintain, and everybody from the teachers to the janitors drove cars that needed tune ups, oil changes, new starters and transmissions, and from fourteen to eighteen, he made the auto shop his home. With his back pressed to a creeper and two tons of steel in his face, conversation was a non-issue – just the way he liked it.

So when his eighteenth birthday arrived and the bus brought him to the courthouse, there was nobody there to meet him. The judge was professionally sorry to break the news about his dad, and shrugged off Neil's response of a quick nod and total silence. He agreed with the boy – there was nothing to say. He

had Neil sign his paperwork, and handed him a fat envelope filled with deeds to his dad's house, the salvage yard, and about a hundred long ago crushed or parted out vehicles.

Well, at least he wasn't homeless. But he sure as hell wasn't following his dad's footsteps into the family business. He invested his first week home tuning up an old tractor and a Bobcat that hadn't been started in more than half a decade, and using them to move every piece of scrap piled up in the front of the house to the salvage yard, where he locked it all away behind the rolling chain link gate. He propped the shiny black hood of a 2030 Olds on its edge in the front yard, and painted *Coleman Auto Repair* across it in bright orange letters. As mean as his dad had been at home, he had a lot of friends in town who remembered him, and his boy, fondly. In no time, Neil had all the business he could handle.

So, it's a very good question why a man with no mortgage and a thriving business would take a part time job as a school janitor? The answer is no stranger than why the son of a billionaire would become school Principal.

Marion Rankin didn't know it, but he was not the only man in Arkady with invisible friends. Nor was he the only person in town who understood his life to be unfolding in service to a prophecy.



\* \* \* \*

"John Harper? That pussy?"

Neil Coleman and Billy Conner met when they were only nine and ten, respectively. Billy was the fourth grader that night at Hobo Camp. Now Billy worked for Neil.

"Not him. His kid." Neil twisted the caps off two beers and handed one over.

"He nailed Anne Gold, that's right," Billy said, easing back into his lawn chair. "Lucky bastard."

"They're married now. Practically the day they graduated."

"She cant be the one. The kid. She's a girl."

"So what? *The woman's* vibe is all over her."

"The prophecy says the Good returns as *the woman's* son. Boy child."

"The prophecy says the Good is *the woman's* son, and that he returns. Doesn't say how. He could ride in on a fiery cloud for all we know." He took a long swig of beer and rested the bottle on the cooler lid beside him. "I'm just saying. Nelly's part of this. And if I can feel it, you can bet Rankin does, too."

\* \* \* \*

In the stillness of exactly 3:00 AM, three women in three beds in three different homes sat up, startled awake by three dreams that might as well have been one and the same dream. Each dreamed they could not move, pressed to a window, encased in ice, a tower of glass, looking on, powerless, as the man each woman loved suffered fire.

Christy Rankin saw Paul sitting alone in his Toyota coup, as a vast yellow fireball engulfed the vehicle. She pressed her face to the windshield, willing him to escape, but a writhing black serpent had him pinned to the seat. Paul pulled at the snake's head, bloodying his hands, but its teeth held fast. Flames found the gas tank and the vehicle exploded...

Jessica Rankin's home was burning, and Tim somehow with it. An invisible breath out of the darkness blew and blew and the ceiling timbers crackled overhead. Ice held her lifeless, but flames that were also somehow Tim now licked up around the bed, working frantically to free her toes, her stomach, her arms, her breasts... But her face was still frozen when the ceiling came down...

Trapped in glass, Anne Harper screamed silence at John kneeling before her, holding his head as twin fires, one to his left and one to his right, raged beyond all possibility of control. Whichever he ran toward, he

would lose his life but save another's. He couldn't choose both – but choose he must or set the whole world blazing...

\* \* \* \*

Eight year old Nelly was wide awake, too. She'd been dreaming of *the woman*, like she did most nights, and she awakened to the sound of rustling leaves. There was a glow at the foot of the bed, and there stood *the woman*, looking down silently beyond the footboard. Nelly assumed she was still asleep and dreaming and smiled.

"Hi," she said.

"The end is beginning."

*The woman* lit the dark bedroom like cool moonlight on water. Yet waves of heat rippled over the bed. Nelly sat up and pushed her hair out of her eyes.

"Are you really here?" she asked. "Can I touch you?"

"Put your shoes on, Nelly," the woman said. "Get ready to run. Always be ready to run."

Nelly jumped out of bed to do as she was told, but *the woman* was gone.

\* \* \* \*

"Close the door."

Dennis Hale stepped reluctantly into Principal Rankin's office. Christy Rankin, the Principal's daughter-in-law and all-around pain in the ass, was already seated across from the large desk. He took the empty chair next to her.

"Nelly Harper," the principal said. "The whole story."

*I hate you* washed quickly over Dennis Hale's already ghost-white features, but it was intended for the Kindergarten teacher and he wouldn't give her the satisfaction, so he snapped the look back without turning his head.

"There's nothing to tell."

"I understand you had a twenty minute closed door meeting with her father yesterday. You sent the child home early."

With monumental effort, he did not turn to stare down the woman beside him. He cleared his throat.

"Nelly said *shit*. That's all. We always call the parents with that sort of thing. I sent her home because she was crying. The day was almost over anyway."

"Why wasn't I informed?"

*You're always informed, you son of a...*

But he didn't speak the words. Instead, he said, "I didn't think it merited your attention."

"You didn't think."

"It was a very minor incident, sir. Kids say things."

"That they do. And all Nelly said was *shit*?"

"I'm sure there was a larger context. But that's what got my attention."

"Maybe we should interview the other children involved?"

Father-in-law and daughter-in-law exchanged glances.

*You already know. You're playing games.*

"If you think that's necessary. Do you want me to call the parents?"

A long pause.

"No, Dennis. I'm sure you handled everything according to policy. You can go now."

## Chapter Fourteen: The True Believers

"Man is the glory of Self," Pastor Roger chanted from the pulpit. It was Sunday morning.

"And Self is the glory of Man," the congregation responded.

"From Universal Self we are born."

"To Universal Self we return."

"All hail Universal Self!"

"And Glory be to Man."

As the all-electric, five man *Fellowship of Self Church* band launched into the driving rhythm of the opening hymn, the overhead lights dimmed and heavy curtains crept slowly open to reveal the altar stage. Black light from hidden spotlights flickered upward, setting moonglow fire to a thousand backdrop stars, before which towered the floor to ceiling effigy of Universal Self. Neither man nor woman, but suggesting both, the massive ebony form stood smooth and naked, its muscled curves and soft contours reflecting to those assembled an impossible perfection of body, mind and spirit all were invited to reach, and reach, and ever more strenuously reach to attain...

*"A mighty fortress is the Self,*

*Our model never fai-a-a-ling!  
Our selves our help amid the flood  
of mortal ills prevailing.  
For still our ancient foe  
does seek to work us woe.  
Unreason's pow'r is great,  
And armed with cru-el hate!  
But self-love is our wea-a-a-pon!"*

The congregation clapped and cheered and stomped their feet as the band crescendoed to a crashing conclusion and a hot white spotlight circled down from the balcony to find Pastor Roger, red faced, wiping sweat from his brow with a carefully folded handkerchief.

*"Aaaawll Haaaail Universal Self!"* the Pastor roared.

"And Glory be to Man!" the crowd roared back.

And from the rear of the church a chant started up:

*Self!... Self!... Self!... Self!... Self!... Self!...*

Pastor Roger raised both hands high and the chant grew louder.

*SELF!... SELF!... SELF!... SELF!...*

Then like an orchestra conductor, with a twirling finger-snip of the air he cut them off.

"Who gathered in this tabernacle today wants to win?"

"*I do!*" the crowd thundered as one.

"Who wants to succeed?"

"*I do!*" came the chorus.

"Who wants to make *a-wallll* their *dr-eeams* come *true!*"

"*I do! I do! I do! I do!*"

"And who, I ask – who, who and only who can make that happen?"

And the chant rose again, "*SELF!... SELF!... SELF!... SELF!...*"

"That's right, friends. Only we can make winners of ourselves. Only we can lay claim to what is rightfully ours. There is no finer emblem of faith in action than a man who has scaled the highest mountain on his own, who has left every miserable, crawling parasite of a failed, fallen neighbor in the dust, the God-man who has planted the flag of Self on the mountaintop of victory!"

"*Victory! Victory! Victory! Victory!*"

"And who, I ask – who can stop the *Victorious Ideal Man?*"



*"No one!... No one!... No one!..."*

"But guard yourselves, friends. Unreason will try! That old devil religion still lurks in every shadow, just waiting for its chance to steal your mind, to sap your will, to shatter your spirit with its *lies lies lies* so great as to deceive, if that were possible, even the elect! *Follow me*, religion seduces. *You're not good enough*, it cries! *You're not strong enough*, it shouts! *You can't save yourself*, it preaches..."

A dramatic pause.

"And what do we say to that?"

*"LIES!... LIES!... LIES!... LIES!... No more sinners! Only winners! No more sinners! Only winners! No more sinners! Only winners!..."*

He let the chant go on until the packed house of worshippers frothed visibly around the edges like a pot about to boil.

"Hallelujah! That's right, only winners, Amen? Can I get an Amen?"

*"AMEN!"*

He waved the crowd quiet. Then gently, wooing, his voice taking on the barest hint of reserved tears, "Are you a winner today, my friend? Have you claimed the prize of self? For yourself?"

Now roaring again:

"Ideal Men! Self-made men! Come forward and testify! Approach the altar of Universal Self and share your story! Inspire us! Show us all your *gu-lo-ry!*"

A great cheer filled the sanctuary. Several men leapt to their feet and began working their way toward the altar, bobbing and weaving like excited game show contestants.

"Now, who'll go first...?"

And it went on like that for what seemed like the whole of the morning. Neil Coleman had not attended a Secular Mass since the Special School's front gate closed behind him on his eighteenth birthday, but he remembered how dumb they were, and how endlessly they seemed to drone on. This particular Mass was dumber than anything he could remember, though, with a lowbrow, *Gospel* thumping enthusiasm the ultra-controlling Special School would never have tolerated.

He sat in the last row of the packed church, ready at a moment's notice to make a run for it. Four rows ahead sat John and Anne Harper, with Nelly between them. The congregation was very clearly divided between a majority who sang and cheered and shouted *Amen!*, and a handful whose posture announced they were present out of obligation only,

and ten minutes in he had no question the Harpers were in the latter group. He'd heard that John went all *Self* in his last months at the School, but it sure didn't look that way, watching him squirm in the pew. Of course, they'd also said Anne killed herself, yet there she sat. And Nelly between them, even in this vile setting radiating *the woman* so brightly he half expected the altar idol itself to stride down into the crowd and devour her. He smoothed hairs standing at attention on his forearms and the back of his neck.

When the service was finally drawing to a close, Youth Pastor Paul Rankin climbed energetically to the podium, waiving a friendly hand at the crowd that was already up and milling toward the center aisle.

"Hold on! Hold on!" he announced. "One more thing. A new season of *Fellowship Youth* starts tonight, and I want every child in this congregation between the ages of eight and seventeen right back in this building at 7:00 sharp. No excuses."

John Harper looked at Anne, who looked at Nelly, who was still seated in the pew shaking her head back and forth – *No way...*

As the crowd filed out of the church, all paid their toll to the parking lot smiling and shaking hands with Pastor Roger, and Paul Rankin beside him. Christy Rankin beamed and smiled and hugged and batted

long eyelashes alongside her husband as the procession passed by.

"I'm so *glad* to see *you!*" she effervesced, reaching through the crowd of pressed bodies to grasp the cuff of Neil Coleman's jacket and pull him uncomfortably close. Their faces were almost touching. She shook his hand up and down. "I *knew* you'd give in eventually. I just *know* we can change *your life*, Mr. Coleman! You simply *must* join our adult *Gospel* study group every Wednesday evening at 6:30. I won't take *no* for an answer!" And her eyelashes fluttered like twin butterflies straining to escape a spider's web.

"*Uhn...*" was the only sound Neil Coleman could make as he pulled free of the Kindergarten teacher's grip. He spotted John Harper through the big open door, already crossing the parking lot, and he lunged ahead through the crowd and fought his way out into the late morning sunlight.

"John!"

John Harper turned. Anne and Nelly were already in the car.

"Neil. Hey."

"Yeah, it's been like forever. We need to talk."

"Okay."

"Not here. My place. Tonight. Bring the girls."

"How've you been, Neil?"

Neil Coleman shook his head. "Tonight."

He reached out quickly and shook John's hand – and in doing so, made a secret sign, thumping three times with his thumb, that John had not experienced since the fourth grade. Even at the Special School, Gooders were afraid to give the sign, for fear of discovery. Or reprisal.

"Wow, really?" he said, giving the sign back, then pulled his hand quickly away. "Listen, Neil..."

"Tonight," Neil Coleman said. "You, Anne and Nelly. We need to talk."

He turned and vanished across the parking lot.

## Chapter Fifteen: The Remnant

John Harper almost didn't pull into the long driveway leading to *Coleman Auto Repair*. He had expected a solitary, secret meeting, but the driveway was lined with cars, at least five he could see from the main road. The wind carried voices and the smell of charcoal smoke. Children squealed at play. He counted nine parked cars by the time he reached the end of the curving driveway. At least a dozen adults sat or stood around two large picnic tables in the front yard, while children of all ages played Frisbee and chase games or pushed scraps of food to Neil's dogs through the diamonds of the chain link salvage yard fence. Neil himself manned the grill, standing next to a table sporting two open coolers. He smiled up as the Harper's joined the party.

"Beer and pop there," he said, indicating the coolers, "Brats and Burgers over here. Help yourselves. I think you know everybody here."

And they did. Well, some of the children were a mystery, but every one of the adults was a comrade from the Special School, not seen up close in many years. As they mingled and rekindled and touched base after base, déjà vu scraped a slow, dry spark the length of John Harper's spine, till it poked through his brain and, as a lit match illumines darkness, he knew. Through the eyes of the child he'd been at nine, he suddenly saw each and every adult present shrunk

down into their third or fourth grade bodies, their rejuveniled faces. This was so much more than a Special School reunion. It was Hobo Camp reborn. Every man and woman gathered in this place had been a child there that night, nearly two decades past. Lots of faces were missing, but not one was new.

He cornered Neil. "This is dangerous."

"This is necessary," Neil said. "Who can we trust but each other? You're new here, but we've been doing this for years. We are the Remnant."

John frowned. "Like in the prophecy." As if from rote: *"The Remnant that waits for the Good and prepares for his return."*

"That's us," Neil said brightly. He took a swig of beer. "And you, too, now. You and Anne. And Nelly."

"The Remnant are all children. They have to be. *The woman* only appears to children."

"We have that covered."

It was only as the words were spoken that John realized he no longer heard the sound of youthful play going on around him. The sun had mostly set. He turned a slow circle on the driveway. Not a child was anywhere to be seen. Or heard.

"Where's Nelly?"

"Inside. With Anne. Come on."

Neil turned up the walk toward the front door. John followed.

As strange as it was, the state of Neil Coleman's living room did not surprise John Harper. It was a cross between a bachelorized living space Neil had made little effort to clean, even knowing he'd have guests, a spillover storeroom for his auto shop, and – the strange part – a NASA mission control room. There was a couch on top of which rested folded clothing and a pile of clean socks, an overstuffed recliner that clearly doubled as a feline scratching post, a large hassock, and a stack of white plastic folding chairs that were being handed out and unfolded as they entered. Car parts and stray electronics littered every horizontal surface. Centered on the wall furthest from the door was an enormous television screen phalanxed by six smaller monitors on shelves, three on each side. The low table on the end of the couch closest to the TV wall held a long box with blinking lights and switches and dials that might have been rescued from the set of a drive-in SciFi movie. The room would have had an eerie quality to it, all on its own, but a dozen people laughing and talking and lining up chairs transformed it into a cozy indoor theater, full of life.

Neil Coleman positioned himself on the couch next to the control board. John set up chairs for Anne and



Nelly, then squeezed himself in next to Neil on the couch.

"You're going to explain all this, right?"

Neil Coleman tapped a button on the box and the screens came to life. The six side monitors lit up with disparate surveillance camera views of the junkyard inside the tall fence, and on each screen one or more children could be seen snaking along paths leading through the squashed cars and piles of scrap, then disappearing at various points into, or behind, or beneath different stacks. The giant central TV at first showed only an empty, low-lit, rectangular room, but the room gradually filled as the children vanishing from the side monitors appeared there, sliding into view from many directions at once. Somebody killed the living room lights and the big screen seemed to brighten and command all their eyes.

"That," Neil explained to John, "is the living room of a double-wide trailer my dad buried in the center of his salvage yard. It's above ground, but completely hidden, even from flyovers. There are six paths through the scrap that lead to secret entrances."

"Why would he do that?"

"I have no idea. He started after I went for re-ed, and died before he could finish. Maybe he planned to

grow pot, I don't know. It wasn't wired when I found it, though. I added the lights and cameras."

"And the kids are in there because...?"

"It's the new moon. They leveled Hobo Camp a long time ago. *The woman* needs a stage."

On the big screen, a sudden flare of light, and the children dropping as one to their knees. John had not seen *the woman* with his own eyes in two decades, but he sure recognized her now, standing there in the hidden room, less than a hundred yards from where he sat. She looked exactly as he remembered.

Nelly jumped to her feet. "*It's her! It's her! It's her!*" She clapped her hands and stood trembling with need to be in that room, with those children. "Please, Daddy, please!"

John shook his head *No* – but Anne was already in motion, standing up and sweeping Nelly into the arms of two mothers who had stepped forward to guide her. "Go," she whispered as tears came. Her look to John said *let her go...* and Nelly was whisked from the room...

...to reappear several long minutes later on TV. In the time it took her to reach the hidden trailer, no one had moved, or even seemed to have taken a breath – not *the woman*, not the children in on their knees in

ecstasy before her, not the parents looking on through their closed circuit lens. Time had frozen, and now Nelly's appearance birthed a collective inhalation.

On the great, glowing screen, the circle of children parted to allow Nelly's entrance. The girl moved to the center, facing *the woman*. The circle closed around them.

Neil Coleman stood and stepped right up to the big screen, almost touching it. That didn't help, so he returned to the control panel and double-tapped a switch. The trailer-cam swiveled, and now he could see over the heads of the children into the circle's center. Nelly and *the woman* were not merely facing one another. They were superimposed, inhabiting the same space, blending one into the other right before his eyes...

And John Harper's eyes, too. John was standing now, pressed close to the near life-size screen.

"Nelly?"

And then *the woman* was gone. Nelly stood alone at the center of the circle of children, phosphorescent rain spinning a storm all around her, then gathering over her small head to form, for a moment so brief none were certain they'd seen it, a winged heart before jetting out through the ceiling and away into the night.

## Chapter Sixteen: Turnings

It was after eleven when they finally turned onto their own street. Nelly slept in the back seat while John and Anne, up front, had not yet found words to begin anything like a full discussion of the evening's events.

As the car turned into the driveway, the sweep of the headlights revealed a man sitting on their front steps. The form was a vague shadow, but a snow-white flash in the moving headlight beam told John who to expect. He parked the car, turned off the engine, and motioned for Anne to stay with Nelly.

"Dennis," he said, taking a seat beside his visitor. "It's late."

"I know. I've been waiting." Then, without waiting for John's response: "I thought I could protect you guys, but I can't. Rankin knows about last week. He cut me a new one for not referring Nelly right away. I did some checking and she's on the warrant list for Wednesday's school board meeting. They're going to take her."

"Shit," John said. "Hell, no."

"Yes. And if you appeal their decision, they'll make me testify at the hearing. If I lie I'll get fired, because Rankin already knows the truth. I don't know how he knows, but he does. If I tell the truth I'll get fired for

cutting Nelly slack. I'm in a bind here. I didn't do anything wrong. I *do not* deserve to be punished for this. They'll take Nelly either way, John, we both know it. But I need my job. There can't be a hearing. I need to know you won't sell me out on this."

It took him several seconds to process what was being said, right there to his face on his own front porch. He stood.

"*Whoa...* Did you just ask me to surrender my daughter without a fight so you can keep your job?"

"They'll take her anyway. You can't stop that. I'm just saying don't drag me down, too."

For the second time that evening, John Harper could find no words worthy of the events unfolding around him.

"Get off my property, Dennis." He started back toward the car, to retrieve his wife and child.

Dennis Hale stood just as a new spray of headlights washed over them both. A tan Toyota pulled to a stop in the driveway.

John checked his watch – 11:48. *What the...*

Paul Rankin stepped out onto the driveway and stood facing the pair, the car door a shield between himself and the two men.

"Hi, John!" Then with an edge of curiosity in his voice, "Dennis?"

"He was just leaving," John Harper said. "And I think you'd better do the same. It's late."

"Sure, no problem," the youth minister said. He visibly straightened as he pulled himself right to the point. "We missed Nelly at *Fellowship Youth* tonight. She was supposed to be there. No excuses, remember?"

"We had plans. Seriously. Everybody go home. Leave."

"It's never wise to blow off church functions. It gets people talking."

"Paul. Listen to me. Get back in your car. Get off my driveway. I'll see you next Sunday."

"No more plans for Nelly on Sunday nights, okay? It can be date night for you and Anne. We'll watch the kid."

John raised both hands. "You have to go."

He looked to Dennis Hale, who was still standing awkwardly on the lawn, hands in pockets, then back to Paul Rankin on the driveway.

"I'm taking *my* family inside *my* house now. Both of you. Go away. We're done."

Anne was suddenly by his side. As he opened the back door to lift Nelly out of the car, he heard Paul Rankin's Toyota back out of the driveway and disappear down the street. A few seconds later, Dennis Hale followed.

\* \* \* \*

The hands of the big white clock aligned as one over the twelve. Midnight, and Marion Rankin was still at his desk. The room was dark, and he sat in his tall leather chair, turned to the window, counting his breaths as Arkady slept. He'd maintained this vigil the night of every new moon for the last twenty-five years. His psyche was wide open, his mind expanded as far as he could push it in every direction, like a spider's web cast over the whole town, straining to sense even the slightest perturbation in the night's spiritual energy.

For years, his skills had been finely enough honed that he could unfailingly sense the moment the apparition broke through into the material realm, but since they'd bulldozed the camp on City Lake, the *where* had become impossible to pinpoint. He knew she was out there, somewhere, spreading her superstition, infecting the children, but she had so far succeeded in blinding him to any fixed location a

simple raid might eliminate. She was that clever... that devious... Maybe *powerful* was a better word.

Until tonight. On this moonless night, like no other night before it, he'd seen the devil Arkady's children called the Good paint a bloody crimson streak into the sky as clearly as if a signal flare had been intentionally fired. And, just as the flaming tail of a rocket always points to the pad that launched it, he'd tracked that streak of light to its source. The appearance had been so brief that anyone looking on with mere physical eyes would have seen nothing, not even a glow. But this was the moment he'd trained for all his life, and when the moment came, he'd been ready.

He turned away from the window to contemplate the fine blue lines of an Arkady street map laid out across his desk, his own straight, dark pencil lines crossing blue and coming together to converge just south of town. He'd found the new Hobo Camp, or at least triangulated the field of its possible locations to within a six square block area. A little door to door, a few parent conferences, and it would all be over but the paperwork.

From his briefcase on the floor beside the desk, a rhythmic *buzz. Buzz. Buzz.* The phone he was allowed to use only to report a major event was ringing. President Oglesby, all the way from Washington, must have seen the light, as well. Destiny was calling. Marion's moment had arrived.



\* \* \* \*

Time for Tim Rankin had grown progressively less linear as the years rolled by. What Jessica experienced as weeks, or months, even years passed for Tim in the blink of what passed in the *vapor* realm for an eye. Other times, single moments seemed to hang, unmoving, for tiny eternities, frozen landscapes in which even the finest detail might not shift for what others experienced as whole human lifetimes. Tonight, the latter rule held, and in Tim's ethereal vision, the crimson heart of the Good was a star hanging motionless in the Arkady sky, its long red tail trailing like ballast on a kite, not really holding it anywhere, but rather following up, and up, and up – and at the same time pointing, unmistakably, down, and down.

Pointing down to the earth. To a hidden place on the earth. To a place where the *seed* of unreason, as had been prophesied, had found fertile soil and sprung to life, raising its brazen stem and leaves and the fiery bloom of its rosy flower over the town.

The sign had come. The enemy was at hand. And to Tim Rankin's otherworldly eyes, for all his long-studied aversion to even the tiniest hint of the irrational, that enemy was intensely, seductively, even *unreasonably* beautiful. For what felt like eternity, he could not compel himself to look away.

\* \* \* \*

1:00 AM, and Neil Coleman was wide awake in the cluttered living room, a glowing computer screen before him, on which *the woman's* interaction with Nelly played over and over, backward and forward, in slow and fast motion, dissected frame by frame by frame, analyzed for sound, color spectrum, levels of light. There were exactly three frames, one digital moment that would have flashed before their eyes, in real life, no longer than an eighth of a second, in which what still remarkably resembled a crimson heart with wing-like extensions could be seen hovering directly over Nelly's head before vanishing up through the ceiling of the buried trailer. He isolated the three images, then brought them together on the screen into a single holographic projection that startled him in its clarity.

The telephone rang. It was John Harper, frantic – *Dennis Hale, the school board, reeducation for Nelly...*

"We're leaving tonight. We're getting out of Arkady."

"Hold on," Neil said. "You can't leave. The sign. I know you saw it. You've got to see what's on my computer screen right now."

"I don't know what I saw." A pause. "I know this much, though. My daughter is not *the seed*. She's an eight year old child. She's not ready for any of this

and neither am I. If we don't leave tonight, they'll take her."

"Come back to my place then. You can have the trailer. It's completely hidden. You'd be crazy to stay in Arkady with the school board on your tail, so everybody'll think you left town. No one will look for you here."

"They'll see my car."

"It's a junkyard. I think I can hide your car."

"Then what? Do we live there forever? Nelly grows up there?"

"Just hide till we figure out what's next. We have got to take the time to understand what happened here tonight. This is not a small thing. This matters."

"The Special School can't have her, and neither can you. We're leaving."

"If Nelly is *the seed*, the Remnant is all she's got, and you know it. That's why you called me. The whole world is going to stand against her. That's a lot for a little kid to face alone. Nelly needs us. You need us."

"Nelly is not *the seed*."

"Well, she's something. You know the prophecy. You know what you saw here tonight. Whatever's

happening, Nelly's at the center. We need time to figure this out. Just get over here, please, for a couple of days at least. I'll have the trailer ready."

Neil Coleman's definition of "ready" left Anne Harper without doubt as to why the twenty-six year old man still lived alone. His idea of bedding was a mattress on the floor and a comforter that smelled like someone had wiped oily hands on it. He gave them the pillow from his own bed; it was the only one he owned. It was 2:00 AM before they settled in, and Anne and Nelly slept side by side on the mattress, fully clothed, with the lights on, while Neil and John went back to the house to spend what was left of the night drinking beer and subjecting Neil's recordings from the new moon gathering to every form of analysis either one of them could imagine.

## Chapter Seventeen: Revelations

By late Thursday afternoon, Marion Rankin was neither smug nor happy. He had two unsolved mysteries on his hands, and the secret phone that in his quarter-century as school principal and chief watcher for *the seed* had never rung now demanded at least daily updates on his progress.

He was not making progress.

Mystery #1, of course, was locating the Good's new staging area, which you'd think would be an easy task within a mere six square block map quadrant. It was on the edge of town, so there weren't even that many houses to check, and only a few businesses. On the pretext of investigating Mystery #2, Arkady's finest had knocked on every door, peered through garage windows, opened old refrigerators in people's back yards, and even spent whole days driving slowly through neighborhoods or sitting in parked squad cars simply waiting for something to happen.

Nothing did. Four days after what Marion now thought of as *the revelation*, he was no closer to an end game regarding the apparition than he'd been Sunday night.

Mystery #2 was the vanishing into thin air of Nelly Harper and her parents. *Why* they had run was common knowledge. Nelly's warrant of confinement

to the Special School had been made official at the previous night's school board meeting. But by the time the ink was wet on the paperwork, let alone dry, the Harpers were long gone, tipped off, it was presumed, by Dennis Hale, who'd been seen at their house late Sunday night by Marion's own son, Paul. Dennis was missing now, too, but nobody had bothered to look for him. He hadn't come to work Monday or Tuesday and, knowing what he knew, Marion had simply mailed a letter of termination to his home address. If the coward dared to showed his face now, it would only be to gather his personal affects – which Marion had already had placed in a large, sealed carton, for the ex-vice principal's convenience.

The mystery was not why the Harpers had run, but where they'd gone. They were a one car family, and that one car had evaporated just as thoroughly as its owners. It had not been spotted leaving town. It had not been stopped anywhere in the state for speeding or a broken tail light. John and Anne Harper's credit and debit cards had not been used, anywhere. There was no sign they had actually left Arkady, though that seemed a reasonable assumption, under the circumstances. But neither was there any evidence they were still in town somewhere. They were just gone.

"Maybe it wasn't really the sign," Paul Rankin offered.  
"Maybe it was just a shooting star. Or a reflection.  
Some freak of nature."

He was sitting across from the big desk, watching his father sulk. Beside him, his wife raked one hand through an oversized purse and finally came up clutching a compact. She studied her face in the tiny mirror.

"I don't believe that. I know what I felt, not just what I saw. Besides, the Feds have no reason to care about a natural event. And they're all over this."

"Maybe where you saw the light isn't where the apparition really appeared. Like it really was the sign, but what you saw Sunday night was a reflection on a cloud or something, and the real base camp is somewhere else."

"Maybe." Marion Rankin exhaled deeply. "It doesn't feel like that, though. It feels like the answer is right in front of me, and I just can't see it. Like I'm sitting on the solution to all of this, and it just won't register. This is pissing me off..."

Christy Rankin snapped the compact closed, stood and crossed to the window. She parted the metal blinds with her fingers and scanned the parking lot with narrowed eyes.

"I'll tell you who pisses *me* off," she said. "That stupid janitor, Neil Coleman. I'm at him all year to attend church like a normal human being, and nothing. He just stands there like I'm not even talking to him. Then Sunday, out of the blue, he shows up. No warning, no *thank you for inviting me*, nothing. Then, when it's over, *boom!*, he's out the door – and making a bee line for that missing person of yours, John Harper, no less, like they're old buddies or something. The worst part is, he promised to join my Wednesday night *Gospel* study group, but did he show? *Hell No!* There is something seriously strange about that man, Marion, and I think you should fire him."

Marion Rankin only really started listening when the Kindergarten teacher said the words *John Harper*. It was a strange tirade for the name to come up in.

"I can't fire him," he said. "He quit. Monday morning. Left a message on my phone. Said he didn't need the job anymore.."

Christy turned toward the desk. The blinds clinked back into place.

"I wonder what that means? He doesn't need the job anymore? *Any more...* Like he needed it Friday, then by Monday he's won the lottery or something and doesn't need to work anymore? What do you suppose happened over the weekend?"



"He never needed the job for money, *Hun*," Paul said. He stood and moved to the Arkady street map his father had tacked onto the wall behind his desk. "He's a mechanic. And a successful one. He's got his own business."

"Then why on earth would he mop floors at a grade school? For the health insurance?"

Marion Rankin stood and moved beside his son. They scanned the map together.

"Maybe he was looking for something," the principal reasoned aloud. "Or someone. Someone that working at the school would make it easier for him to find. A certain child, perhaps..."

"Which, when found, makes the job unnecessary," his son finished.

Marion and Paul Rankin exchanged knowing looks. The principal turned to the big desk and retrieved a list of businesses located within the six square block target zone.

Third on the list: *Coleman Auto Repair*.

"The cops had to have talked to him. They interviewed everybody in his neighborhood."

"They did. They found nothing suspicious."

"Can you get them back out there?"

Marion Rankin thought the suggestion through in silence.

"Not the police," he said at last. "I have a better idea."

\* \* \* \*

In all the years the ghost of his father had inhabited the walls of Rankin Mansion, it had never occurred to Marion to ask if his dad could be other places – like, was his spirit chained to his old home the way you hear about in the usual tragic ghost stories on TV, or had he chosen his final resting place? Was he stuck where he was, or could he move about at will? Could he haunt any location of his choosing?

Which is how Marion Francis Rankin learned, in the course of communicating these questions to a mind no longer operating in the same timeframe as regular flesh and blood human beings, and receiving from that mind equally timeless responses, that his father, Tim Rankin, not only was not a ghost by any traditional definition of that term, he wasn't even dead. It was impossible for Tim to describe to his son across the time barrier exactly what his physical condition actually was, as what had happened to him had quite possibly never occurred to any other person in all the history of the world. There was nothing in Marion Rankin's experience Tim could compare his

state to, so it could not be made comprehensible in ordinary language. But he knew for sure he wasn't dead. He was considerably less certain whether he was technically *alive* by the usual definition of that term, but he was confident he had not experienced anything like the dissolution of being human beings label death. In fact, not only was he not currently dead, he had stopped aging altogether when the metamorphosis began, so he did not appear to be moving toward death, or anything else, for that matter. He appeared, from his own vantage point, anyway, to be essentially immortal.

One thing was certain: However difficult Tim Rankin's present status as an apparently immortal superconscious being might be to explain or understand in human terms, it had been initiated by, and existed at the will of, President Oglesby – and so, it was by definition a holy state. As hard as it might be to nail down in concrete, English language concepts, Tim Rankin was what enlightenment looked like. He was just about as Universal as an individual self could get.

Marion's question had been: *could he haunt any location of his choosing?*

The truth: *he didn't know.*

After finding himself drawn home to Arkady, it had never occurred to him to even try being anywhere but

enmeshed in the home and world of his wife and child, the only beings in the whole human realm he truly cared for. But now that his only son was requesting his assistance, Tim found reason to try, and in trying, found movement and relocation easy. Movement was fun and exciting after decades of immobility. He inhabited a tree, a running, pissing, happy family dog, the Barrett County Library, where all the words in all the books hit his mind in a single ecstatic flood that left him giddy. He became one with a car left running in the Family Dollar parking lot, took it for an apparently unmanned spin, then flipped gleefully up into a blue jay sailing overhead as the car exploded into a telephone pole at forty miles per hour.

The crash brought him to his senses. *Mother...*

Movement was possible, but dangerous. Yes, he could travel the world and possess beings and objects at will. But wisdom told him not to risk such things lightly. Universality was not a toy. Such sojourns could only be justified by an exceptional cause, allied to a crystal clear plan.

Both of which his son had at the ready.

For the next two weeks, Tim Rankin possessed *Coleman Auto Repair*. And Neil Coleman's house. And the double-wide trailer so carefully hidden amidst the scrap, where John, Anne and Nelly Harper went

about their clandestine lives. From inside Neil's computer, he reviewed years of recordings of apparitional appearances, culminating in Nelly's transfiguration and *the seed's* revelation at the last new moon. He absorbed the names and home addresses of all the members of the Remnant. He was present in the walls as Neil discussed with John and Anne in person, and with others over the phone, plans for the next new moon gathering in just ten days time. The Good's self-revelation at the last gathering had raised dramatic hopes amongst Remnant families. The coming new moon would change all their lives forever.

Tim returned to Rankin Mansion and passed all of this information, as best he could, considering the time differential, to his son, who phoned it in by secret dedicated line to President Oglesby's people. Within the hour, the command arrived to stand down. Let no one know the Remnant had been exposed. Let them plan their new moon gathering. Await further orders.

## Chapter Eighteen: Trial by Fire

When the orders finally came, even Marion Rankin – true believer in President Oglesby’s divine incarnation, devotee of *Self*, lifelong aspirant to Ideal Man status, and twenty-five year veteran watcher for *the seed*, who had unsentimentally confined hundreds of children to the Special School in service to prophecy – was not completely comfortable with the plan.

He had never murdered children before. But when he applied solid, objective reasoning to the issue – knowing, as he did, that all their little selves would simply return to Universal Self, from which they came, and at whose command their physical deaths had been ordered – he could point to nothing irrational in the plan. It was the most efficient means of accomplishing the goal, and that was all that objectively mattered.

It made planning so much easier to know exactly where the apparition would materialize, and thus where the children would be gathered – with Nelly Harper at their center. They would even form a circle around the girl, a living target, with Nelly as the bull’s-eye. The parents would have to be dealt with separately, after the fact, but that was just a mop up operation, really. Once *the seed* was dead, and her entourage with her, it was over. All the years of waiting, watching, culling families in anticipation of

this moment would be justified. Unreason would be undone.

They rehearsed the plan, Marion and his invisible father, over and over in the psychic space where their human and superhuman minds overlapped, until they could visualize every step together, in perfect sync, like dominoes toppling one after another after another.

All the while, upstairs, Jessica Rankin, Marion's mother, Tim's wife, now an old woman, drank and slept and watched her TV. An attendant brought food and a fresh bottle. She would soon be asleep again.

\* \* \* \*

"I vote Albuquerque," Neil Coleman said. He drummed two fingers on the coffee table. *Drum drum.* "The Remnant down there is awesome. Great families, great food. Amazing local beer. But this close to the new moon, we don't have to guess. We can afford to wait." *Drum drum.* "For orders."

In their three weeks living under cover in the hidden trailer, a whole new world had opened before John and Anne Harper. *Coleman Auto Repair*, it turned out, inhabited the center of an invisible network of Remnant groups scattered all across the globe. Each group of families kept the story alive in their isolated community, passed it on faithfully to new

generations, and gathered monthly to watch Neil's new moon recordings by secret broadcast from Arkady. Not only were John and Anne Harper not alone in their beliefs, they had stumbled across an entire underground movement of believers, people just like themselves, gathered in pockets throughout the world, who secretly kept the faith, and who now watched with eager anticipation to see what came next regarding their daughter's role in the prophesied revelation of *the seed* and the return of the Good to the world.

It was a lot to absorb, but in three solid weeks with nothing to do but learn, John felt he had a handle on the situation. He was getting anxious to move on, to put as much distance between his family and Marion Rankin as he could.

"A few more nights," Neil assured him. "Wherever *the woman* sends you, I want to go, too. This whole thing's in motion now. I'm excited. Wherever Nelly goes, that's the new center. I want to be there."

\* \* \* \*

The dusk of the new moon found the Arkady Remnant where it always did, sharing brats and burgers, Frisbee and fellowship, before retreating to Neil's living room and sending their children snaking out through the darkness toward the trailer.



"Hey," Neil said to nobody in particular. He toggled a switch back and forth on the control panel, then looked up for John Harper. "I can't turn the lights on from here," he said. "Go light the trailer, then get out of there before *the woman* comes. Or she won't." A pause, and a smile. "You're too old for her."

"I'm on it." John passed Anne in the kitchen. "The trailer's dark. Switch problems. I'll be right back."

"Take me with you." She dug a flashlight out of a kitchen drawer, passed it to John, and they whisked out the back door together.

The tunnel through the tall mounds of scrap was nearly pitch black dark. The deeper they went into the stacks, the darker it got, until the narrow beam of the flashlight was all they had to find their way. They heard squealing up ahead.

"Nelly!" John shouted. "Turn on the lights already! You know where they are!"

"Daddy!"

The lights did not come on. John pictured the kids inside, frantic in the dark.

"I'm coming! Hold on!"

John and Anne reached the trailer's front door and pulled it wide. The sound of children fumbling in the

dark. Anne slid past him and into the trailer. John followed.

"Everybody help me find the switch. It has to be right here by the door somewhere..."

The metal door slammed shut behind him with such force it sent him flying through the room. The coffee table cracked against both his shins at once and he tumbled forward to crash head first onto the floor. The flashlight spun out of his hands and went dark with a thud. John pulled himself to a sitting position.

"Everybody just stay put. Stay right where you are. I've got my phone, and I'm going to call the house. Just stay calm."

"John," Anne said.

"Help is on the way, don't worry."

"John. Do you smell that?"

A whiff of burning insulation hit him just as she spoke the words.

"I smell it. Hold on."

Using his phone as a flashlight, he crawled past several seated, frightened children, back to the front door. It wouldn't open. He threw all his weight

against it, then sat and kicked with both legs.  
Nothing.

"Anne. Do you have your phone? We need more light."

"No..."

But suddenly there was plenty of light as sparks exploded out of the breaker box at the end of the trailer's long hallway and the wall and ceiling across the whole back of the unit were burning.

*"Shit!"*

"Daddy!"

"Stay put, Nelly. I'm coming. Talk to me so I can find you."

"Daddy! *I'm scared I'm scared I'm scared!*"

"I know, baby." He scooped her up in the darkness.  
"Anne! Everybody! Follow my voice!"

He began to count out loud so the children could follow as he made his way to the furthest bedroom away from the now raging fire. Only the kids and Neil Coleman knew where all the secret entrances were, but he was sure he had seen children emerge from this bedroom in the new moon recordings. There had to be a way out.

"In here! Let's go!"

He stepped through the open bedroom door with Nelly in his arms. The door slammed shut behind him. Fists pounded the door from the other side.

"John! Open the door!"

"I didn't close it. Hold on!" He put Nelly on the bed, then repeated his front door performance, with the same effect. The door would not budge. "There are other exits. You've got to find one, Anne. Those kids know where they are."

"I can't see anything! Smoke..."

"Shit!" John shouted. He looked to where he knew Nelly was laying, frozen in fear, on the bed, then back to the door. "Anne. I'm getting Nelly out. I'll come back for you. But you have got to try to find one of the exits. Lead the kids out."

"Ok, John. Get Nelly out."

And in the total darkness of the sealed bedroom, a dot of light appeared, no larger than a single drop of water. Though it was full night outside now, John crazily imagined the dot was daylight seeping through where the door to the exit must be, and he rushed toward it.

"Nelly, come on!"

He found the girl's hand on the bed and pulled her toward him.

"Save Mommy..."

"Let's go."

The light disappeared, but his hand, reaching for it in the darkness, fell squarely on the handle of a low wooden door. He pulled it open and smelled fresh air.

"Come on!"

They squeezed through the tiny door, and landed on the path, amidst the scrap. Flames rose up through the crushed cars and old appliances covering the far end of the trailer, and they found their way by its flickering orange light. John brought Nelly as far as the rolling chain link gate, then released her hand.

"Nelly, I need you to stay right here. Do not move. I'm going back for your mother."

Something inside the trailer exploded and a plume of red flame with a blue and white center fired up into the sky.

"Stay here!" John shouted over what was now the roar of flames, and disappeared back down the tunnel.

When he reached the small door they'd escaped through, it was sealed. He found a heavy steel pipe in the scrap and began to wail against the door with all his might. *Bang. Bang. Bang.* He thought he heard the door finally splintering, then was blown back as the center section of the trailer fell in on itself, and a tower of piled junk shifted and crashed to fill the hole.

He did not have time to think about what just happened. He ran back to the gate, where he had left Nelly. She was gone.

\* \* \* \*

Alone in his father's mansion, except for his mother, drunk and oblivious on the third floor, Marion Rankin frowned and shook his head. They had rehearsed the plan so many times. What happened could not have happened.

By the time Tim Rankin's superhuman consciousness secured complete control of the trailer, the two adult Harpers were already inside, and that was fine. Their deaths would be an added bonus. The interior bedroom door left standing open was a reasonable oversight. They hadn't planned for any adults to be there, or for anyone to rally the children and lead an escape. But the trap door defied reason. There were six exits from the trailer, counting the front door. Before the fire even started, Tim Rankin had every one of them sealed tight, including the one leading to

and from the back bedroom. The door should not have opened. John and Nelly Harper should be dead now. Their escape made the deaths of Anne Harper and the other children something of a hollow victory.

His personal phone rang. It was Paul.

"Yes?"

"Don't worry, I have her."

Marion Rankin sighed, and only then realized he'd been holding his breath.

"Thank you, Paul. Take her directly to the Special School. You have the warrant with you, in case you're stopped?"

"I do. Don't worry. We have *the seed*. It's still a victory, Dad. We still won."

"Ideal Men always do," Marion said – though, in that moment, he was not so sure.

## Part IV: The Problem of Evil, 2066

*For these things I weep —  
My eyes! My eyes!  
They stream with tears!  
How far from me is  
anyone to comfort,  
anyone to restore my life.  
My children are desolate;  
the enemy has prevailed.*

Lamentations 1:16

New American Bible



## Chapter Nineteen: Rage

John Harper knew he should be caving in with grief, and he could sense sorrow boiling like thick, black soup somewhere off in the distance. Concern for his child, now a prisoner of the Special School, should by all rights consume him, and thoughts of Nelly did flicker here and there like tiny candles in his darkness. But even three full days after the fire, one spent in jail while police sorted out what had happened and who to blame, one arranging for Anne's burial, and one lying flat on his back in his own bed at home, staring wide-eyed at the ceiling as final events at the salvage yard looped and looped through his mind, the only feeling he was sure he could identify churning inside his body was *rage*. Rage, not bright like a flame, but hot like fire hidden behind a closed door, smothering every other sensation, but not yet consuming, not yet burning through.

Holding the rage in check was a brick wall of guilt, stacking higher and higher, thought by falling thought, like a rain of stones pouring and piling onto his chest. This guilt was no simple measure of his failure to save Anne or Nelly. These were stones of awakening, of opening his eyes at last to the truth of his own immense stupidity. To the madness of a grown man believing in fairy tales. Of risking everything in service to a lie. Of trading the lives of his wife and child for... absolutely nothing.

*Belief in the supernatural equals mental illness; they'd* pounded this into his head every day for ten years at the Special School. And he'd ignored them. He knew better. He was above their *reason*.

And for the second time, Anne was dead. For the second time, it was his fault. And now, Nelly might not be dead, but she was dead to him until released someday from the Special School, a grown woman and a stranger. If he could trade his own life to reverse the ruin his folly had brought on his family, he would kick off the edge of that cliff with joy. But that, too, was a fantasy, and he refused to entertain it.

He was done with fantasy. The Good *the woman* was supposed to represent was either a monster happy to roast its followers to death, or a weakling powerless to save them. There was only one sense to be made of what had happened to Anne and the Remnant children. *They died for a lie*. Their meaningless deaths proved the nonsense of it all. The School was right – there was no Good. There was no Evil. And belief in the existence of either, or any imagined struggle between them, defined insanity. *The woman* was a dangerous hallucination. A story. A lie. Maybe Miss Bray and Commandant Meyer could undo the damage he'd inflicted on his own child by leading her to believe otherwise. He hoped so. Nelly was better off in their custody.

But in exchange for Good and Evil, the School could only offer Nelly *Self* – and *Self* was a fantasy, too. The biggest lie of all. He'd seen full well how pathetic and powerless his own self had proven in the face of, not just the fire, but Marion Rankin and his school board, eight years playing secret Gooder while shamelessly *selfing* in public, ten years fighting a School system that won the day it took him from his parents, from his home, but he was too stupid to see it. One lame, gullible lifetime – *a whole lifetime!* – shaped by a story some kid told him on the playground. If that was the best *Self* could do...

Well, then, *Self* was an illusion. Just like Good. Just like Evil. Nothing in the whole universe was all powerful, all encompassing, all anything. Nothing was real that you couldn't hold in your hand. There was no significant difference between a human being, a yapping dog, or a stone on the ground. Kick the stone and it flies away. Throw a stick and the dog brings it back. Tell a man the stupidest thing you can think of and he'll build a life around it.

But, as clearly as he could define the philosophical nuance of his situation, even this appeared as if projected on a distant screen with the lights down and no sound. That was it. He was watching a movie in a theater at the bottom of the sea, the weight of the whole ocean pressing down on his body, filling his mouth and ears. His thoughts were razor sharp. His mind recognized what a normal human being ought

to be feeling, under the circumstances. He could name what drove the quiver in his hands, the tick in the corner of his eye, his racing heart. But what he actually *felt*, the way he used to feel love or joy or longing in his chest, in the length or shortness of his breath, was *nothing at all*. Dead air. He did not love, or hate, or long for anything. He was not on the verge of either tears or laughter. He was a mechanical man, a thinking machine, the mere appearance of a living human being, and it was pure reflex that finally lifted him out of the bed and set his body into motion.

His phone was ringing. From the coffee table in the living room. He watched his body sit up, creak out of the bed, set itself in a remarkable imitation of human motion across the carpet. His hand picked up the phone.

"Yeah."

"John. It's Neil. I have to show you something."

John ended the call and placed the phone back on the table. He rubbed his face with both hands. He'd started a beard.

The phone rang again, flashing blue light. His hand scooped it up.

"Yeah."

"It wasn't an accident. They were murdered."

He wanted to end the call again, but his hand wouldn't do it. "I can't take this."

"It's all on the recording. You have to see this. For yourself."

"I don't have to see anything. I don't have to see you. I don't want to talk to you."

"We have to rescue Nelly. They'll kill her at the Special School. They can't afford to let *the seed* live."

"She's not *the seed*!" An outburst, then his voice flattened again. "Who'll kill her, Neil? Who would want to kill Nelly? A little kid?"

"The thing that killed twelve children and your wife. It's not a person. It's a thing. I can show it to you."

"You're the murderer, Neil. You and your half-assed wiring and your trailer buried in junk."

"Just come over. Watch the recording. Hear me out." A long pause. "You know, it wasn't just Anne. The Remnant is shattered. Those people lost their kids in the attack. And that's what it was, an attack. I think Nelly was the target. We have to break her out before they try again. She's a sitting duck there."

"You're dreaming. Let it go."

"Just come over."

\* \* \* \*

The recording did, indeed, show something, but what? Scenes unfolded on eight screens at once, the six paths leading through the junk to the trailer, the main room interior view, and a long shot John had not seen before, from a camera that must be installed very high up and on a far end of the property, as its panorama revealed the whole scrap yard, Neil's house, and even a few parked cars on the cul-de-sac.

On first viewing, the events of that evening played out much as he remembered, with the children weaving their way to the trailer, lights out, John and Anne on the path, the explosion, fire, collapse. Then Neil applied a filter, and a new element appeared. Children weaving. No lights. John and Anne entering the scene. Then a strange glow on the panorama, a pale, yellow-green cloud like a swarm of sparkling bees following the power line to the house. From there, the glow zipped across the scrap yard at ground level, to disappear right where the trailer was hidden. A few minutes later, explosion. Fire. Collapse. The cloud reappeared and retreated, retracing its path and vanishing where the power lines exceeded the camera's field of vision.

"You added that. It's a special effect."

"No. This is real, and there's more. Watch the distance shot."

Tiny figures appeared, moving toward the junkyard gate. John and Nelly.

Neil tapped the controls and the camera zoomed in.

John vanished, leaving Nelly alone. She was crying, hysterical, hugging herself and stamping her little feet in frustration and fear.

But she stayed put. Her father said *don't move*, and she does not move.

"Nelly..."

Minutes passed. Headlights. A figure approaching. Nelly knows him, backs away. A hand grabs her arm. The image freezes.

"Now, get this." Neil worked the controls, and the camera shifted and zoomed in. A face resolved on the screen before them.

Paul Rankin.

"Son of a bitch. Where did he come from?"

"Exactly. There's way more to this story than meets the eye."

"Like?"

"I'm not sure yet. But we do know once he grabbed Nelly, he took her straight to the Special School. She was admitted within an hour of the time this was shot."

"How do you know that?"

"I have friends on the inside. Don't you? We spent half our lives there." Neil's hands returned to the control board. "But that's not what matters. I tapped an NSA satellite scan of North America, and isolated Arkady from roughly one hour before the fire to one hour after. Watch."

The image on the panorama screen changed, and became, at first, a gray mass of clouds, then a mad rush toward the floor as the clouds plummeted upward, dissipated, and a bird's eye view of Arkady at night filled the screen. Neil touched a control and the filter fell back into place. Near the center of town, a cloud of sparkling bees, spinning in luminescent circles, but contained in one place, not traveling as they had seen it in the first recording.

"So where is it settled? Your place is south of there."

"The first question isn't *where*, but *when*."

"Okay, when?"

"One hour before the fire. It hasn't started its motion yet."



"Okay, so where is it when this shot was taken?  
Where's it starting from?"

Neil manipulated his control board and Arkady rushed toward the camera. The green-yellow glow filled the screen. They were looking down on a neighborhood from a hundred feet, maybe. The cloud of light engulfed a large house, tracing its lines like a thin coat of phosphorescent paint.

It was a house anyone raised in Arkady would know on sight, the biggest, fanciest house in town.

Rankin Mansion.

"Son of a bitch."

"Yep. Now I'll speed things up."

Neil backed the camera back up into the sky and the glow shrunk away again. Now fist-sized, it released the house and gathered itself into a cloud above the roof, then set off in fast motion across town. It stopped, settled, and vanished. Moments later, the red pulse of fire. Then the cloud, rising, returning by the same path, resettling over the mansion.

"Okay, I believe you," John Harper said. "But what is it?"

"Some kind of energy weapon, maybe, pulling power from the electric lines? That is, of course, a guess, but what else could it be?"

"It's Rankin, no matter how it's done," John said. "He murdered Anne. He killed the Remnant children in cold blood. Now he's got Nelly..."

"Let's think this through a minute. We saw Paul take Nelly. But the weapon launched from his old man's house. Paul's a toady. He's got to be working for his dad. The school board authorized Nelly's confinement, and as an officer of the church, Paul has legal authority to deliver her to the School. Against her will or yours. But you can bet Marion sent him."

"He knew where she was. They used *that*..." John's hands flailed up toward the wall of screens. "... to start the fire, then grabbed Nelly when she escaped. So they wanted her dead. And, they knew she got away. They were watching the whole time."

"Watching how?"

"How do you do all this?"

Neil considered his houseful of mostly homemade equipment.

"Point taken. Surveillance is easy. But what we're seeing on these recordings... I can't even begin to imagine how that's done."

He zoomed in on the house, lit up under his image filter like a Mardi Gras parade float.

"Marion Rankin is just a grade school principal. Paul's a preacher. This is way beyond me, technologically, so I *guaran-damn-tee* you it's beyond them. We're looking at a weapon here. Like US Military. Federal Government."

John frowned. "You're saying the Army gave Marion Rankin a death ray so he could kill my eight year old daughter?"

"It sounds stupid, I know. But yeah, that's what I'm saying. And the one and only way this makes sense is if our cover is completely blown. If Washington is on to the Remnant and knows Nelly is *the seed*, and the Good is on his way back and they plan to stop it. Come on, John, this is what we've believed our whole lives. We knew this day was coming."

"You just lost me," John Harper said, his voice going flat again. "I *have* believed what you just said for a long time. My whole life, like you said. And look where it brought me. Anne dead. Nelly gone. Twelve little kids charred to ashes. Now we're talking satellites and secret weapons."

He stood, and began to pace.

"Did you ever think maybe we've been wrong our whole lives, Neil? That none of this is real? Maybe we're just crazy, you know? And it's all gone too far..."

Neil Coleman turned off all of the monitors. He stood and put his hands on John's shoulders, steadying his friend.

"*We. Are. Not. Insane,*" he said, slowly, deliberately, looking directly into John Harper's eyes. "The Good is coming. The Evil is attacking us. *The woman* will help us. This is real."

And staring back into Neil Coleman's sincere and serious eyes, John Harper knew that he could not afford to alienate the young mechanic. Of course they were insane. Of course the Good, the Evil, *the woman* were lies. But he needed Neil Coleman to believe that he still believed. Neil's expertise, his connections, his willingness to do anything in the service of the fantasy that had him mesmerized and controlled his destiny were all critical to the plan that now emerged fully formed into his mind, pushing into consciousness behind a molten flow of rage that had finally broken through. He was feeling again.

Marion Rankin had to die. Slowly, horribly, painfully, just like Anne did. And he needed Neil to make that happen.

He lowered his gaze. "You're right. Of course, you're right. We've come so far. This is no time to lose faith."

"For Anne," Neil offered.

"For Anne," John echoed, and for long time, all he could see was red.

## Chapter Twenty: The Best Laid Plans

Of course, Anne was only dead in a strict, material sense of the word, measured in breaths rising and falling within the chest of a physical body. But that coarse, earthly standard failed even to enter Anne's mind as she closed her eyes on a scene of panicking children, fire, and black smoke everywhere, and opened them to a light brighter, she was sure, than she knew how to imagine. She was surrounded by light, floating in it, held on all sides by light like gentle hands touching her everywhere. When she turned her new eyes on herself, she saw only more light.

"At last we can speak plainly."

And the light resolved around her into a great castle bedroom where gently glowing stone walls were hung with tapestries and woven cords. She lay beneath ornate blankets in a tall, four-poster bed surrounded on all sides by gauzy white veils. At the foot of the bed, just beyond the pale curtains, *the woman*.

Anne couldn't help but laugh. "Are we on the moon?"

"If you wish." And all at once a window filled with stars, and the earth like half a marble sparkling blue on the horizon.

"I wish Nelly was here. She would love this."

"Nelly has work to do," *the woman* said. "But she needs our help. The Evil has her."

Anne saw Nelly, on her knees beside a little cot of a bed, all alone in her dorm room, alternately weeping and praying for all she was worth. A piece of Anne became love and surrounded the girl. Nelly looked up.

"You'll get used to how things work here." *The woman* was no longer veiled. She was smiling. "This is *the vision*. Once you learn to navigate, we'll help Nelly."

"Is this a dream?"

"You died to the dream, child. It was a good death, so now you are here."

"A good death?"

"Question later. Play now. Play until you belong to *the vision*, till it belongs to you. Grasp it with joy. Mold it, but let it mold you, as well."

"What about Nelly?"

"That is being arranged. We'll go to her soon"

"And, John?"

"We'll see him soon, too. And you'll need to be ready." Her tone lightened. "But you must first embrace *the vision*. Play. Learn. Taste. See."

A door, and the sound of running feet, children squealing through the hallway.

"Go!"

And Anne was off, laughing, a streak of light chasing light through broadening avenues of ever more light.

\* \* \* \*

"Have a seat, Miss Bray."

Superintendent Meyer did not look up from the paperwork before him as the counselor closed and locked the door, then took her seat across from the desk. Once she was settled, he punched a button on the telephone.

"I'm putting you on speaker. Present in the room is myself, Barrett County Special School Superintendent Ronald Meyer, and Student Counselor Deanna Bray."

A moment of silence, then the speaker crackled to life. "Very good. You'll understand if we don't recite names on our end."

"Of course."



"Your report, then."

"Twelve children and one adult died in the fire at the salvage yard attached to the auto repair business. Nelly Harper escaped harm, and was delivered into Special School custody at 10:45 PM CDT. She is currently being held in a solitary facility, under the supervision of Miss Bray. She has not been allowed to interact with other children, or with staff beyond the counselor and myself."

"Very good. Keep her isolated. A team has been dispatched to bring her to Washington. They will contact you directly with their progress. Until they arrive, take all necessary precautions."

"Precautions?"

"Don't allow her to escape, Superintendent. Or be rescued. Considering the stakes here, anything could happen. Expect trouble."

"Wouldn't it be safer to simply... terminate the child?"

"That would certainly get my vote. But I don't get a vote. We've been ordered to bring her to Washington, so that's what we'll do. Lock her in a cage if you have to. Post armed guards. Just don't let her go."

"Consider it done."

\* \* \* \*

Nelly's fear left her so suddenly that its absence stole her breath. The deadly silence of her room was broken by a sound of children running through the hallway, feet pounding, trailing laughter. She ran to the door, but it was locked.

"Open! Open!" she shouted, slapping at the door with the palm of her hand. "Hey! I'm in here!"

But all was silence again. She considered bursting into tears, but they wouldn't come. Here she was, locked away all alone, but she didn't feel alone at all. Terrible things had happened, but she couldn't shake the certainty that everything was going to be alright. She returned to the bed and sat with her back against the wall, her legs curled Indian-style beneath her. A tune from *The Queen of the World Show* entered her thoughts, and the sound of her own voice startled her as she found herself singing, quietly, aloud:

*When the dark seems darkest,  
and Evil's won the day,  
fear not, I am with you,  
and help is on its way – Hey!*

Nelly leaned over the side of the bed and scooped her shoes up off the floor. She needed to be ready. Ready to run.

\* \* \* \*

"It's more incendiary than explosive."

The device Neil Coleman hunched over on the auto shop workbench looked to John's eyes like two common electrical outlet boxes connected by wires. It did not appear particularly threatening.

"Which means?"

"More *burn* than *boom*," Neil answered. "It's not our goal to level the whole estate. The weapon is clearly in the main house, so we draw the line there. As little damage as possible. But what destruction there is needs to be total. This should do the trick."

"I thought you were building a bomb."

"Too indiscriminate. This is a chemical firestarter that will reduce anything in its path to cinders. But unlike a bomb, we can direct its path. It will take down what we point it at, and nothing else."

"Sounds like you have a plan."

"Of course I do. Rankin's got that three-bay attached garage. The house is live-wired, but the alarm on the garage hasn't worked in a while. I checked it out."

"Of course you did." John no longer even bothered to ask about Neil's sources. If he said the alarm was out, it was out. "So I sneak into the garage and attach this thing..."

"To the shared wall, directed toward the house. Right."

"Then I flip the switch and whoosh, the house is gone."

"Right. But we have one problem."

"Only one. That's good..."

"Jessica Rankin. Marion's mother. She's the actual owner of the house. She lives upstairs, and she never, ever leaves."

"Marion Rankin has a mother?" It was an image that, in his whole life, he had never even imagined.

"She's not even that old. Mid-seventies, maybe. But she's got problems. Alcoholism, for starters. Depression. We have to get her out of the house."

"Why?"

"Because we're not murderers, John. Rankin is, but we're not. I am not okay with killing anybody. We take out the weapon, but that's it."

John Harper covered his eyes with one hand and slowly massaged, back and forth, across his forehead. If Neil wanted to waste time and effort saving the old woman, that was fine. He'd play along. But he had bigger fish to fry, like figuring out how to make sure

Marion Rankin – and Paul, too, if he could swing it – were safely inside the house when he flipped that switch.

Killing murderers was not murder. It was justice.

## Chapter Twenty-One: Convergence

There it was again. Children's voices, laughter in the hallway. Miss Bray had made it very clear that Nelly was alone, not another soul in the building, no one to hear her scream or call for help, so don't bother. But the sounds, like joy whispering circles in the hallway, had the girl on the edge of her bed, shoes laced and ready to fire like a rocket for the door at the first sign of opening.

Anne chased the Remnant children one last time, laughing, past Nelly's door, then shushed them and they scattered like leaves into *the vision*. She hovered there silently, it seemed like forever, facing the closed door to Nelly's room. *The woman* was suddenly beside her, nodding – *yes*.

She was ready. Anne nodded her assent, pressed *the woman's* glowing hand into her own, and they passed as one through the heavy, locked door.

And Nelly was up. "*Mamma!*"

There was no doubt the girl could see her, and *the woman* beside her.

"Oh, *thank you thank you thank you!*" Nelly shot across the room and fell to her knees before *the woman*. She dropped prostrate to the floor, a courtier before her queen. "I knew you'd come! I knew it!"

"Baby..."

When Nelly lifted her face to her mother, she was radiant. "Oh, Mamma..."

Glowing teardrops on both their faces.

"Bad men are coming," Anne told her daughter. "But good men will get here first. Daddy is coming for you, Nelly. First we must save him, you and I together. Then he will save you."

"I don't understand..."

"Just believe, Nelly. I am with you forever. This is how the Good returns."

\* \* \* \*

President Michael Oglesby had no intention of bringing *the seed* back to Washington alive. He had ordered her death, and that order stood. Only the girl's annihilation could guarantee a permanent end to the story, and *The Gospel's* final victory over unreason.

But first, he had work to do – work that only he, on the whole of the earth, could do. He had believed he understood the apparitional nature of the creature religionists called *the woman*. The paraphysical state he'd imposed on Tim Rankin should have made him her equal. It should have enabled him, if not to

overpower her, at the very least to engage her directly, hand to hand, as if they were made of the same substance. Yet, *the woman* had opened the trap door and saved the girl and her father as if Tim Rankin was not even there, inside the walls, holding the panel tight. He did not understand how that was possible, and he desperately wanted another shot at his adversary.

If he killed the girl now, *the woman* would start over, in hiding, appearing in a new town somewhere, to new children, and he would be right back to square one.

Alive, Nelly was tantalizing bait. He may have misjudged his enemy's strength, but he had studied her behavior for so many years that he felt certain he understood her motivation and her mind. *The woman* would not be able to resist appearing to Nelly at the Special School. She would attempt to lead the girl out, as she had saved her from the fire, as she had led Nelly's mother, and Nelly with her, in the womb, past all the School's defenses to Arkady and freedom.

And when she showed herself, he would be there. In person. If *the woman* found Tim Rankin a cream puff to be lightly cast aside, it was clear that finally defeating her was going to require nothing short of *divine intervention*. And the only man on earth capable of delivering *that* was the little godling himself.



He had one shot, and it had to go perfectly. With both *the seed* and *the woman* removed permanently from the picture, there would be no force on earth capable of challenging his Universal rule.

*My eternal rule...* he couldn't help but add. A frame on the desk contained, not a photo, but a polished silver mirror. He picked it up in both hands and studied his own reflection. Nearly fifty years in the White House, and not a day of it showed in his face. The God-ordained vicar of *The Gospel of Self* deserved nothing less than eternal physical youth and vigor. It was only fitting. There were days when the weight of his true age and wisdom slowed him down on the inside – and this was one of those days. But you would never know by looking.

Michael Oglesby replaced the mirror, then stood and surveyed the trappings of Presidential power surrounding him. He took a deep breath. He felt good. He felt strong.

His whole life had been leading to this moment. He was ready.

A man with a straight spine and a clean blue suit entered the Oval Office. "A team has been dispatched to meet you on site, Mr. President. A car is waiting to take you to the airport."

"Very good. Thank you."

\* \* \* \*

Neil's excess of caution made John Harper crazy, but he had no choice but to play along if he wanted a working device and a chance to fulfill his plan.

"Rankin leaves for work at 7:15 sharp," Neil said. "He gets home between 4:30 and 5:00. Occasionally later – but don't count on that."

In addition to the incendiary device, there were now three black boxes, each the size and shape of a phone, on the workbench in Neil's garage.

"After you plant the device itself," he continued, indicating the boxes, "you'll connect one of these to each garage door. We'll be able to open and close each door independently, by remote. The trigger is now set to work like a combination lock. Opening and closing the doors in the correct sequence sets off the device. Any other sequence, nothing happens. Take too long working the right sequence, still nothing. The trigger resets every ten minutes."

"Kind of overkill, don't you think?"

"It's no kill. So the thing *cannot* go off accidentally when somebody's home."

"I get that."

Neil carefully moved all the pieces of the device from the workbench into a plain, black backpack, and handed it to John.

"There's putty in here to attach the device. It should hug the wall, tight, against wood or drywall. Plant it low – heat rises. And out of site. The control override boxes are magnetic. Stick one directly to the overhead mechanism of each bay door. On top, where no one will see it."

He opened a drawer in the workbench and pulled out another black box, this one slender, with a blue keypad.

"This is the remote." He placed it in the backpack.

"The sequence is one, two, three. One is the door closest to the house. Two is center, and door three is the furthest out. Open door one, and close it. Open door two, close it. Open door three, close it. *Boom*. It's not rocket science. But the chances of that sequence occurring naturally in any ten minute interval are pretty much nil."

"What about Jessica Rankin? Upstairs?"

"I don't know yet. Just get everything set up. I'll think of something."

\* \* \* \*

"Tim? Is that you?"

Jessica Rankin sat up in her bed, and in doing so, toppled an open bottle that had been resting against her side as she slept. Brandy gurgled onto the bedspread, and she slapped the bottle away to thud against the carpet below. Following the thud, a distant tinkle of shattering glass.

But she could see the bottle on the floor; it wasn't broken.

"Tim? Somebody's in the house! Tim!"

And though she had never learned to see him, Jessica Rankin felt the comforting press of her husband's presence close in around her. She knew she was safe.

"Don't leave me," she said, softly, as she settled back into the pillows. "Stay with me." Then in a commanding screech – "*Girl!*"

Mrs. Rankin's attendant entered from the hallway, carrying a tray on which balanced a fresh bottle of brandy and a clean glass snifter.

"Thank you."

The girl placed the tray on the nightstand.

"Now get out."

The girl silently retraced her steps to the doorway.

"Bring soda water and clean up this mess. Right away."

"Yes, Ma'am." The door clicked shut behind her.

"I heard something, Tim," Jessica Rankin said to the empty room around her. "Intruder... Break in... Protect me, please..." She drifted quietly back to sleep.

Tim Rankin's awareness drifted away from his sleeping wife to coalesce around the high window overlooking the grounds. A man wearing a backpack was moving in fast motion, away from the house, across the manicured grass. He slipped through the hedge into the neighbor's yard and was gone.

The man was John Harper. The man from the hidden trailer. The fugitive whose child must die. Tim Rankin drifted slowly throughout the house, wrapping his consciousness carefully around each room, each door, every window. Nothing was missing. Entry had not been forced anywhere. The alarm maintained its silent vigil over the house.

Why had John Harper been in the yard? He would alert Marion the moment he came home from work. In the meantime, Tim Rankin formed such a potent protective barrier around his sleeping wife that when the girl returned with her cleaning supplies, she could not open the door.

The brandy stain sunk deeper into the carpet.

## **Chapter Twenty-Two: The Heat and the Light**

John Harper had found the garage unsecured, just as Neil described it. The back door, entering from the yard, wasn't even locked. He'd been able to walk right in and get to work.

With Marion Rankin at school, all three vehicle bays were unoccupied, leaving the garage interior a vast, echoing cave. The walls were lined with metal shelving, on which tools, landscaping supplies and labeled storage containers formed neat rows and columns. An alcove housed a shiny green mower that looked as if it had never been driven. In the northeast corner, hugging the house, was a low wooden platform on which stood the object he had hoped he would find there – a gas hot water heater.

Neil considered a bomb too indiscriminate, too messy. But there couldn't be enough mess for John. Burn the house, sure, but blow it up, too. Level everything. Goodbye garage. Goodbye gardens. Trees cracking down to scorched earth. Marion crushed beneath tons of burning rubble. Arkady trembling before his fiery monument to vengeance.

He didn't buy Neil's government weapon theory – that was a little to SciFi for his tastes. But it didn't matter how Rankin had started the fire that killed Anne, that was meant to kill Nelly. He did it, and that

was all John really needed to know. The weird glow on Neil's recordings could be the Evil itself, for all he knew or cared. Whatever it was, it left this house and returned to it. Marion Rankin controlled it. And for that, he would die. Score settled.

He secured the incendiary device in the space beneath the water heater, pointing toward the wall, but tilted up just a bit to ensure the first sparks of chemical heat would find the gas line. From the mower alcove, he retrieved several partially filled gas cans, and circled them around the water heater, caps off to let fumes escape and oxygen enter. He packed spray paint cans, paint thinner and barbeque starter fluid between the gasoline containers, then made a shelf to shelf search of the entire garage, stacking every can, box, bottle or bag with *warning flammable* on the label into a mounding pyre of combustibles that filled half the first vehicle bay.

It was a big, big bomb. Very impressive.

He powered on and secured the three magnetic garage door control boxes, then slipped out through the same door he'd entered by. A glass suncatcher dropped from a hook on the door as he pulled it closed behind him, falling with a tinkling splash to the cement garage floor. He darted for the cover of the neighbor's hedge, then through to safety.



All he had to do now was sit in his vehicle, parked half a block away, wait for Marion to come home, then trigger the device. *Boom*. It was almost over.

But when he reached the car, Neil Coleman was in the driver's seat. Billy Conner rode shotgun.

"Give me your keys and get in the back," Neil said.

"It's my car."

"Just get in. We have to save Nelly. Right now."

"Why?"

"The Feds are coming. To take her to Washington. That means I'm right."

"About what, exactly?"

"About everything. They know Nelly's *the seed*. They know about the Remnant. You and me. They're coming for your kid, man. Get in."

"Nelly is not *the seed*."

"Well, they think she is, and they're going to kill her – if not here then when they get her back to D. C. They have to kill *the seed*, you know that. And they think it's Nelly. If we don't bust her out in the next two hours, she's dead."

John turned toward Rankin Mansion, towering over all the other neighborhood homes.

"Get in the car," Neil said.

"Everything's set up. We need to finish this."

"We need to go. You've got the remote. Nothing can happen while we're gone."

"What if they find it?"

"They won't. It's hidden, right?"

Silence.

"Nelly comes first. Get in the car."

"Shit."

He handed Neil his keys and climbed in the back. The engine started.

"Just the three of us?"

"What's left of the Remnant is meeting us there. Should be a couple more guys, at least."

"Against the whole Special School. And potentially the Feds... Are we armed?"

"No, but we know our way around the place. And I have friends on staff. I know I can get us through the gate."

"In and out?"

"Well, in, at least. We'll play the rest by ear."

"Great."

John Harper settled back into the seat and toyed with the remote, pushing all the right buttons in the right order to blow Marion Rankin to pieces and clear off the face of the earth. They were already beyond the little remote's range, but it was fun to imagine.

\* \* \* \*

"Are you a ghost now?" Nelly asked.

They sat side by side on the bed, the mattress beneath the girl marked by her sleight weight. Not a wrinkle under Anne. Mother smiled at daughter.

"Not a ghost." she answered, gently. "I'm too happy. Ghosts are always sad on TV. Or angry. I'm not either of those things. I feel great."

"But you died."

"I did," Anne said. "And it was very strange. But it wasn't scary. I fell asleep with the children in Mr.

Coleman's trailer and woke up in a room with *the woman*. We all did. I don't know if that's how death works for everybody, but it did for us. The Remnant children are all safe. They're happy you're safe."

"Am I safe?"

"Nothing bad can happen to you now. *The woman* will see to that."

"Are you like *the woman* now?"

Anne considered this.

"I think so. We're family, if that makes sense. We're all her family. *The woman* is very, very special. The place she lives is called *the vision*, and there are lots of people there. Everybody's happy. It's fun. When you're part of *the vision*, you can make things happen just by thinking about them. You can fly and walk through walls... Like a ghost, except nobody there is dead. They died to get there, but now they're more alive than they ever were before."

"I don't understand."

"I don't either, really. And I'm not doing a very good job of describing things. But there's one thing I know for sure now, Nelly – *we all live forever*. When we die, we don't just stop living, and nobody gets absorbed by any ocean like they tell you in Sunday school. That's all a lie. There really is a Good and there really

is an Evil, and *the vision* is where the Good lives. *The vision* is full of the Good. You feel it around you all the time like warm light in every color you can imagine. *The woman* lives there. Her son lives there..."

"*The seed?*" Nelly asked. "Mr. Coleman thinks I'm *the seed*. Miss Bray does, too."

"There just aren't words for this, baby. *The woman* is the mother of the Good. *The seed* is her son. They picked you, out of all the little girls in the whole wide world, to play a very special role in their story."

"Their story?"

"Of how the Good returns to the world. Most people are still sick with the Evil, Nelly. They don't believe in the Good. They only care about themselves. The only thing that can save them is how much the Good loves them. The Good has chosen you to show that love to the world in a special way. So people can choose it over the Evil. So they can choose it over themselves."

"Do I have to die?"

Anne laughed. "No, silly! You have to live, and grow up, and be a light to the whole world!"

"I don't know how to do that." But she was tingling all over. She felt laughter bubbling up from her belly to her chest and into her mouth. She held it back with a grin. "*Mamma...*"

"I know, it's exciting!"

Anne put her arms around the girl and Nelly was sure she could feel their weight. She snuggled close.

"And we will be with you every moment, always and forever, baby. Not just in this life. But forever and ever, truly."

Outside the window, a flash and a *boom*. A siren began to wail.

## **Chapter Twenty-Three: On Enemy Ground**

"That's our cue," Neil said. "Let's go."

They'd driven to within a hundred yards of the front gate, then left the road to conceal John's car in the woods. The explosion and the spire of white light that accompanied it toppled a section of the tall fence on the far side of campus, and by the time they reached the main entrance on foot, the gate was unguarded, security staff having sped off in response to the distant, sounding siren.

The steel gate was unlocked and standing slightly ajar. They slipped through in silence, and Neil secured the gate behind them.

"Follow me."

He led them to the unmanned guard shack, then circled around the little building to a small employee parking lot where a white service van awaited them, keys in the ignition.

"Friends on the inside?" John questioned.

"Just get in."

They made their way across the Special School campus, with Neil driving and Billy Conner in the passenger seat. John balanced against hanging electrical cables, tools and white plastic parts

compartments that lined the walls in the back, squatting precariously and holding on with both hands.

In the distance, gunfire.

"Who brought guns?" Billy asked.

"Not us," Neil said. "And School security isn't armed, so that leaves the Feds. They beat us here."

"Great."

Neil kept the van crawling at the posted speed limit. As they rounded the curve past John's old residence hall, B Dorm, they had to stop altogether. The street was filled with kids pouring out of the dormitory, standing shoulder to shoulder, pressing forward as six black sedans with dark-tinted windows processed slowly by. Leading the parade was Special School security, red and blue lights flashing.

Across the grass, more strobing lights. A School security vehicle, parked, with two men spread-eagle, hands on the hood. A third man lay motionless on the ground. Uniformed guards frisked the standing men, while serious looking men in suits stood watching.

Neil pulled the van to the curb and threw it into park. He left the engine running.



"Those guys in custody....," he started, then cut to the chase. "We're it now. Time to split up. Nelly's in Girls Dorm J, third floor. She's the only kid in the building, but count on guards. Expect a trap. Billy, get the van over there and be ready. John and I go on foot. By different routes. Don't get caught."

He opened the van door and disappeared into the crowd. Billy worked himself over into the driver's seat. In the rear view mirror, he could see John, still in the back.

"*What?*" he demanded.

"Girls Dorm J?" John asked. "Which way?"

Billy rolled his eyes. "Follow the parade, man."

"Right."

John slipped forward and around into the passenger seat, then out through the door. The van moved slowly back into the teeming street. The parade of Federal vehicles was just disappearing around a corner two blocks ahead, and John set off across the grass on an intercept course.

\* \* \* \*

Superintendent Meyer had no idea what to say. The President of the United States was standing in his office. He looked exactly like the official framed

photograph that had hung in the Administration Lobby since the day the School opened – which was long before his time, and he'd been in charge more than a decade.

"My men will handle the entire operation," the President was saying. "Order your security forces to stand down. I want the whole area cleared."

"Of course." He pushed a button on the telephone, and gave the order. His security chief did not question. "Five minutes, Mr. President. Then the campus is yours."

"Get the children to their rooms and lock down the dorms. There must be no interference."

"Yes, Sir."

"And, Superintendent."

"Yes, Sir?"

"Three men are making their way across your campus right now in a misguided effort to rescue the girl. One is driving a van, and two are on foot. Do not intercept them. Do nothing to arouse their suspicion. Let them reach the girl's dormitory. We will be taking them with us."

"Yes, Sir."

"And I want your staff on lockdown, too. The moment the children are secured. One of the rescuers is very well connected inside your little operation here, Superintendent. A member of my staff will provide you with a list of accomplices. I think you'll be surprised."

Superintendent Meyer felt his breath crumble beneath him.

"Yes, Sir," he managed.

"And I expect you to take action."

"Of course, Mr. President."

\* \* \* \*

Marion Rankin could hardly stand to be at work. *The seed* was captured. Mission accomplished. There was no reason to still be sitting at this desk, shuffling papers, pretending to read the reports spread out before him.

He had invested twenty-five laser-focused years in preparation for the prophesied emergence of the enemy of reason. He had been the faithful watcher, the President's vanguard, the one man trusted by the very highest powers to conduct the most important manhunt in all of history.

Now the search was over. And having succeeded, having stayed the course, having delivered spectacularly on the task assigned to him, he found himself unceremoniously cast aside. Out of the loop. The dedicated phone that had not let him rest since the night of *the revelation* now lay dead in his briefcase.

He felt ignored. He felt used.

He had learned through secondary sources that a team of Federal agents were this very moment collecting Nelly Harper for transport to the Capitol. Someone should have informed him directly. He deserved to be involved in the transfer. The President of the United States, God incarnate, the physical embodiment of Universal Self on earth, should in this victorious moment feel – and demonstrate – nothing but gratitude for his years of exemplary service. By all rational measure, he, Marion, was the one who should be travelling to the White House – to receive a hero's welcome, the Medal of Honor, a lifetime appointment to some high cabinet post or cushy ambassadorship...

"Think of it as job security," Paul Rankin said, though his lighthearted tone fell flat even on his own ears. "We won. We broke the prophecy, and now the world won't change. Everything stays the same. Arkady School still needs a principal. *The Gospel* still needs talented preachers."

Marion Rankin slowly shook his head.

"We don't need jobs, Paul. We need recognition. Without due reward, our service all these years will have been *selfless*, and that's an abomination. It violates *The Gospel*, and a part of me simply cannot accept that President Oglesby would treat us this way. He is *The Gospel*. He is the fully realized Ideal Man."

"I agree, Dad. It can't be what it looks like, so we have to assume that there's a higher plan unfolding here. And even though we can't see it right now, we are both in that plan somewhere. We *will* be rewarded. We are not served by jumping to premature conclusions."

"You're right. Of course you're right. I hope you're right."

\* \* \* \*

Tim Rankin never slept, but all at once he was sure he was dreaming. The timeline stretching before him into eternity was all wrong.

*The seed* was in custody. The Arkady Remnant had been dispersed, and information he'd gathered from the mechanic's computer would soon allow a global roundup of dissidents. President Oglesby himself – Michael, little Cho-cho, the most spiritually and

politically powerful man the earth had ever seen, Humanity's liberator – lay personally in wait for *the woman*, ready to once and for all eradicate her demonic influence on human spiritual evolution.

The prophecy was broken. The future was secure.

And yet, when he looked forward in time, *the woman* was there, looking back. The Remnant did not control the world, but it wasn't dead, either. It had united around *the seed* and appeared to be growing.

It was a dream, a nightmare, a spectral projection of his own worst fears, or Marion's, maybe, infecting his vision.

It could not be real. It had to be a dream.

But Tim Rankin never slept. John Harper had been in the yard. Something was very wrong.

He needed his son to come home, right away. He needed his family together.

## **Part V: The Eyes of the Good, 2066**

*For my thoughts are not your thoughts,  
nor are your ways my ways  
—oracle of the LORD.*

Isaiah 55:8

New American Bible

## **Chapter Twenty-Four: Stairway to Heaven**

John Harper was the first to reach Girls Dorm J, and in doing so, he realized something strange was going on. Twice along the way he'd blundered directly across the path of School security guards, and both times the uniformed men had looked away and hurried off as if they hadn't seen him.

But he was sure they had. It was as if he was protected by an unseen force, though he no longer believed in such things. Maybe they were just incompetent. Or otherwise occupied.

Or maybe they were following orders. What would that mean?

He didn't have time to think it through. He had to rescue Nelly, escape from the Special School, and get back to Arkady by 5:00 PM to kill Marion Rankin and destroy Rankin Mansion before somebody discovered his makeshift bomb in the garage. He hoped whatever luck had brought him unscathed thus far would hold out just a little bit longer.

All six black government sedans were parked in a neat row along the front of the dormitory, but not a single suited agent was in sight. John walked right up the main steps and entered through the front door.



The lobby was deserted. He slipped into the stairwell and made his way toward the third floor in eerie silence. By the second turn of the winding staircase, his tingling intuition convinced him to slow down – it had to be a setup. Of course, the Federal agents were here somewhere, presumably waiting for him at the top of the stairs. Their cars were parked and empty. Where else would they be?

He exited the stairwell on what should have been the vacant second floor. He had to bring himself to a full stop, and close and reopen his eyes twice, before he could accept that the scene he found himself stepping into was real.

The dormitory hallway was crowded with blue-suited Secret Service agents, at least a dozen of them, unmoving, posed like mannequins caught in various states of precarious balance – walking, reaching inside jackets for guns, spinning toward the stairwell door with eyes clearly focused on the sound of his entry. One second earlier, they'd been in motion, ready to take him, springing their trap, and now they were frozen in time.

Which was remarkable enough, but it was not the human diorama before him that now had him closing his eyes, slowly, one more time, as a final test of the reality of what he saw materializing in the space between the stationary men. A circle of brilliant white light was opening out of nothing in the center of the

long hallway. It slowly expanded, floor to ceiling, wall to wall, acquiring depth and roundness, like a bubble, as it grew. Inside the bubble of light, a flight of ordinary-looking wooden stairs trailed upward and out of sight beyond the sphere's upper edge.

*"Daddy!"*

It was Nelly's voice, no question, more excited than afraid, coming from the top of the illuminated staircase. He stepped closer and crouched low, craning his neck to see just how far the stairs continued – but no matter how he positioned himself, they appeared to go on forever.

"Daddy, hurry! Come up. You don't have to be scared."

He, of all people, should be the last to come to Nelly's rescue. He'd set her up for this, teaching an innocent little child to believe the one thing in all society it was a crime to believe. He'd made her an outcast and ruined her life. It was his fault as much as Marion Rankin's, or Neil Coleman's, that Anne was dead and Nelly would grow up raised by strangers – if she grew up at all, if the Feds didn't just shoot her before he could reach the top of those stairs...

Yet, here he was, playing the hero. The good guy. And if, by pure dumb luck, he managed to pull off this miracle, to lead Nelly out, to escape the School,

his very next move would be to commit premeditated murder. What a fine example he was setting...

He no longer recognized himself or the world around him. Everything was ugly. Nothing added up.

Then a single thought, like a shining beacon, formed suddenly crystal-clear in his mind. Nelly was right. Thanks to the mess he'd made of everyone's lives – Nelly's, Anne's, his own – he really did have nothing to fear, because he had absolutely nothing left to lose.

He bolted up the glowing staircase.

\* \* \* \*

And found himself in Nelly's room. The bubble shrank and closed behind him, and the mystery stairs were gone. The floor was solid beneath his feet. He expected Nelly to come running and leap into his arms, but she stood her tiny ground beside the bed, watching him.

"Let's go," he said, but neither of them moved toward the door.

"Daddy," Nelly said. "Daddy, can you see her?"

"I see you," John said. "Come on, baby. We've got to get out of here."

"Mommy's crying," Nelly said. "She knows what you're planning, and she's crying for you, Daddy. You're not supposed to kill people, ever. Not even bad people."

"Mommy's dead, Nelly. I'm so sorry. It's my fault. I should have saved her."

"She's right here, Daddy. Don't you see her?"

"Cut it out, Nelly. This is creepy. I'll fix things, I promise. But we have to go."

Invisible to John's eyes, Anne placed her hands on Nelly's shoulders. She blended with her daughter, as *the woman* had overshadowed the girl the night the Good was revealed.

"*John*," Nelly said, and the word was so strange coming out of the little girl's mouth that John Harper fell to his knees. He told himself that he did not recognize his wife's voice.

"Stop it, Nelly!"

But he knew it was Anne, and when Nelly spoke again, his wife's words sliced fire through the shell of his resolve.

"You stop it, John. You have to be stronger than this. If you let the Evil take you, you'll be lost to us forever. And we need you with us. Nelly and I need you."

"I'll fail you, Nelly. I already have..."

"Stop it! Right now!"

Nelly was frightened by the sound of her own voice, speaking to her father this way. But her mother talking through her was like water rushing downhill. The words tumbled out; there was no stopping them.

"John, you have to choose. You cannot love me and hate Marion Rankin at the same time. Hate consumes everything. It's all you'll have left. Your hatred is the Evil devouring you from inside."

"The Evil is a lie!" His hands were clasped tight before him. He was breaking, on his knees, praying for his words to be true. "The Good is a lie. We're on our own. Nelly..."

"John! I am standing right here. Because the Good is real."

"If the Good is real, he would have saved you."

"He saved you. And through you, he saved Nelly."

"For what? Saved us for what?" He was boiling again. "This is bullshit, Anne. We're pawns. We're being used."

"You feel so sorry for yourself. Can't you see it? You want to kill Marion Rankin to make yourself feel

better. You couldn't save me, so the whole world burns, is that it? *Self, self self*. Come on, John. We've seen through that lie our whole lives. It's the first thing we loved about each other."

John shrieked then and pounded both fists against the floor. Nelly backed away in terror, and Anne willed a wave of comfort over the girl.

"*Why are you dead?*" John shouted through tears. "The Good let you die – *why?* I hate the Good! I hate him!"

Nelly was in tears, but Anne's voice remained solid.

"The Good knew I would be fine, John. The Remnant children, too. He knew we would all fly straight to him, and we did. He wasn't sure about you. So he had to save you."

"What does that mean?"

"It means we are all children of the Good. All of us. Even Marion Rankin. Even the worst person in the world, the biggest liar, the craziest killer. The Good wills that everyone be saved, John. Even you. Most people don't know it, they don't believe it. But we are all his children. Don't you see what that means?"

John was silent.

"If we die hating him, we're lost to him forever, and that breaks his heart. The Evil wounds us all, and

poison seeps out of that wound and because of it we hurt other people. John, we know this. But see the world through the Good's eyes. The children he loves more than anything, wounded, poisoned, hurting each other, hating, causing more wounds, hurting and hating, round and round... If Nelly had a knife to someone's throat, what would you do? Would you kill her to stop the murder? Your own child? If killing her meant she'd be lost to you forever? And what if her victim was also your child? How would you choose? The Good makes that choice a thousand times a day, every day. We make him make that choice, by believing the Evil when he tells us our wound is the biggest wound in the world, our pain is the only pain that matters, that if the Good really loved us he'd give us everything we want, and what he gives to someone else he must be taking from us. Hating Marion Rankin won't stop the Good from loving him. You just force the Good to choose between you, and he doesn't want that. All the Good wants is one more chance to love you both, to give you both one more chance to love him more than the Evil's flattery, more than yourself..."

"It's all a lie, Anne. Don't you see? No one can love like that, not even the Good..."

He did not see *the woman*, but he felt her familiar presence coming into being behind him. Nelly stepped forward and took his face in both her little hands. She kneeled and hugged him for all she was

worth. Anne and *the woman* moved as one to join the embrace.

And John Harper was overshadowed.



## Chapter Twenty-Five: The Vision

And then he was light.

*Love freely pouring  
from the heart of the Good,  
like wings warming chicks  
against a mother hen's body.  
It held people close,  
and shielded from danger,  
like the arms of a father  
protecting his own.*

*But the heart of the Good  
had been beaten to breaking.  
The Evil, transfigured  
by malice and pride  
from the Good's greatest artwork  
to hater, to liar.  
Murderer. Thief.  
He loved the Good, truly,  
but could not abide  
the Good's love for these humans,  
so fickle, so frail.  
So he'd taken them hostage  
and filled them with poison.  
They needn't embrace him,  
just turn from the Good –*

*and the easiest ploy  
was to hand them a mirror.*

*How easily humans  
became their own gods,  
and traded the love  
of the Good for reflections  
of crowns on their heads.  
Oh, kings of creation!  
How they struggled to push off  
the weight of his caring.  
How they chased after pleasures  
with poison inside them.  
How the Good, like a shepherd,  
would not leave his flock,  
but instead suffered with them,  
and carried their burdens,  
and patiently waited  
to heal their hearts...*

It was a song, a poem, a story unfolding in reality, in time, in light scrolling right there before of his eyes, but that also rang out around him in a chorus of voices, in a choir of bells...

That suddenly stopped.

He thought of *The Queen of the World Show*, and the songs Nelly sang...

... And all at once they were there, in the endless sea of light. *The woman*, Nelly, Anne, holding between them a beating human heart that he knew was his own. *The woman* pushed her hand through the wall of

its flesh and drew out a black, sharp-edged stone. In the palm of her hand the stone melted to water, then rose into the air, a white and glowing teardrop. It circled around them, gaining speed with each orbit, then like an arrow fired downward, plunged back into the heart...

And John's eyes were opened. He saw before him, across the whole plane of the world, teeming Humanity, exactly as the Good sees them:

With one eye, he saw men, women, even children torn to pieces, chiseled down, ravaged, their lives, their love, the great potential of their spirits stolen away by the Evil, the murderer, the thief who bids they rend their own souls in trade for death hidden in even in the most ordinary of pleasures. People scuttled about, frightened shadows, bent and bleeding gnomes, hugging the earth. Through tricks and deception, the Evil stole what was best in each of them, rolled their talents and virtues on his tongue like sweet candy, bit down, then offered in solace only more death in whispers of sex and wealth and power...

But in the other eye, the very same people were glorious. Brilliance radiated from every man, every woman, every child – every human being a shining sun, a lamp in the darkness, a sparkling jewel whose light collectively illuminated the world. Through this eye every person was irreplaceably precious, his very

own child, a delight to be provided for, held close, graciously loved, and protected at all costs...

Then the two visions blended, and he saw the human race through the eyes of the Good – the radiance all men, every woman, all children were in nature, and the darkness they'd settled for, what the Evil had made of them.

And he was anguish.

A curtain opened. Scenes displayed:

Over there, Paul Rankin, a boy of nine, fleeing in terror, hurtling through woods, away from City Lake, his gut churning at his own easy betrayal of his father – Dad's trust, his life's mission – done just to fit in, to be one of the guys, blinking tears at the thought of the beating he deserved, but knew he wouldn't get. Dad would know; he always knew. He'd never hit his son, but sometimes Paul wished he would. He deserved it. He'd do anything now to regain his father's trust, even betray all his friends... *I'm sorry! Oh, Dad!*

And Marion Rankin, fatherless boy, showered in riches in place of love by an invisible dad no one could ever say for sure was either dead or alive, and who one day came home in both of those states, or neither, a ghost in the walls, a monster Marion loved for coming home to him at all...

Tim Rankin, thirteen, destroyed by his mother's death, recreated in the image of a jealous man's philosophy, then betrayed by that man to the very loss of his humanity...

Even poor Michael Oglesby, enslaved from the cradle to the darkest of destinies, trained like a chimp to work miracles and wonders, released like a lion to reshape the world in the image of his dead father's self-involved fantasies...

They struck out in their pain, like wolves caught in traps, and he could not help but weep for them all. His heart broke for love of each one. The tragic, impossible love of the Good washed over and through him in great, rushing waves he let fill his lungs, envelop his heart, extinguish his rage. He surrendered completely to the love of the Good and dived deep...

... then resurfaced, gasping. On his knees. A hard, wooden floor. Nelly in his arms.

"Daddy?"

He had no words. He held his child, and let her hold him.

"Daddy? I think we can go now."

Anne and *the woman* had gone, he could feel it. It was just him and Nelly, now. Against the School, against armed Federal agents, against all the odds.

But if the Good was for them, who could stand against them?

A patter of gravel against glass. John and Nelly moved together to the little window. Three floors down, Neil Coleman stood beside the white service truck, throwing-arm ready to launch a second salvo of stones. To John's eyes, Neil glowed. Sparks of light circled his body like a field of stars. John tried the window, but it was sealed tight. He rapped his knuckles hard three times against the glass instead, in hopes his friend would get the message they were on their way down.

\* \* \* \*

The failure of his team was simply unacceptable. Michael Oglesby didn't need to be physically present inside the dormitory to understand what was happening. It was all too clear. The witch had delivered the girl to John Harper, while twelve Secret Servicemen stood idly by. They would argue that it wasn't their fault, that they'd been hypnotized, or hexed.

But he was out of patience. He was done with excuses.

His eyes closed briefly as he willed the release of their useless little selves back to the void that had spawned them. On the second floor of Girls Dorm J, twelve blue-suited bodies crashed, lifeless, to the floor.

Superintendent Meyer noted a momentary distraction on the part of the President, but made no guess as to its meaning.

“The radio’s gone from static to silence. Should I send in School Security?”

“Oh, no, Superintendent,” the President said. “We’re beyond that now. When I leave this room, you and Miss Bray are on lockdown with your staff. You will not attempt to leave this office until you hear the order directly from me. Do you understand?”

The Superintendent and the counselor exchanged glances.

“Of course, Mr. President. Only on your order.”

When President Michael Oglesby stepped alone into the long Administration building hallway, he was not surprised to find his path to the exit blocked by a sparkling teardrop that slowly expanded into a robed, glowing woman.

The hallway exploded into light.

\* \* \* \*

“What was that?”

John and Nelly Harper were standing with Neil now, beside the service truck. The engine was running. Billy Conner was behind the wheel. They had simply walked together down three flights of stairs and out the front door of the dormitory. They’d taken the east stairs instead of the west, to avoid the Federal agents, but that was the only precaution they took. And all along the way, not a single human being had crossed their path or tried to stop them.

“Lightning, maybe?” Neil shaded his eyes and scanned a full circle around them. There’d been a blinding flash of light, but it had not been followed by the boom of thunder. It was still broad daylight and the sky was clear, so to be seen at all, the flash had to have been enormous. But no smoke rose over the horizon, nothing appeared to be in ruins.

“Whatever,” Billy Conner said, and revved the engine. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Right.”

John and Nelly entered the truck through the passenger door, then slid around to the back. Neil took shotgun, and they retraced their path, unmolested, to the front gate. The gate was locked, but there were still no guards.



"You've got a key, right?" John questioned.

Neil shrugged.

"Don't worry," Billy Conner said. "I've got it covered."

He put the truck in reverse, and backed slowly to the first curve of the blacktopped road. He threw the transmission into drive and floored the accelerator.

"Hold tight!"

They hit the gate and it flew wide before them.

## Chapter Twenty-Six: Moments of Truth

"WooHooo!" Billy sang out, one fist in the air. He pounded the steering wheel and the horn blared. "We win! Next stop, Rankin Mansion!"

"Oh, crap."

John told them, then, about the vision, and especially what it had revealed to him about Tim Rankin. What killed Anne and the Remnant children was not a weapon; it was a person. A very messed up person, but one who was as much a victim as anyone who died in the fire. John couldn't explain how, but Tim Rankin was somehow alive inside the walls of the house. And Marion's mother was still upstairs. They couldn't go through with it. People would die.

"I never liked that plan, anyway," Neil said. He turned the remote upside down on his knee, removed the battery cover, and gave the device a firm whack. Four power cells clattered to the floor of the truck.

John shook his head. "I wish it was that simple."

He confessed, then, about turning Neil's device into a giant bomb, his plan to kill Marion Rankin, his complete unconcern for Marion's mother on the third floor.

"That's dark," Neil said. "But don't worry. I can defuse anything you put together. Just get me over there."

"I'll do it." John looked to his daughter curled up in his lap, then back up to his friend. "You and Billy get Nelly out of Arkady. You've got connections. You know where to go. You've got people out there. I'll catch up with you."

\* \* \* \*

Michael Oglesby was blind. More than that, he was furious. With one parlor trick, the witch had genuinely injured him. The body whose perfect health he'd preserved for decades through relentless spiritual practice was now... *imperfect*. No longer ideal. With a simple flash of light, she had proven the most powerful man in the world's complete powerlessness before her. She had marked him the way a dog marks a tree, and there was no washing the stain away.

He lay flat on his back on the cold hallway tile. A hand touched his shoulder. He heard voices.

"Don't move him! He might have internal injuries. Call security. Have them find the doctor and get her over here, quick."

He recognized the voice. It was Superintendent Meyer speaking, presumably, to Miss Bray.

Eyes closed, speaking slowly: "*I. Did. Not. Give. The. Command.* You are still on lockdown, Superintendent. Call no one."

"But you're injured, Mr. President. Let us help you."

"Return to the office. Both of you. This moment."

They did as they were told. When he heard the office door click shut behind them, Michael Oglesby pushed himself to a sitting position and sat for a long time, right there, cross-legged on the floor. He laid his hands across his eyes and willed healing, as he had healed others when there had been a political favor to be gained, as he had withheld from his foster father, knowing the old man would only be a burden in America.

Nothing changed. The message was clear. *The woman* had the power. His head was already caught beneath her foot, and all too soon she'd be pressing down...

And that was simply unacceptable. He had invested his entire life, literally from the cradle, in ridding humanity of reliance on supernatural fantasies like *the woman* and her *seed*. He had single-handedly torn memory of the Good out of every human brain on earth. He had freed men to live for themselves, for the

glory of their minds and the expression of their individual human potential. He was the world's true savior.

Yet here he sat, in the dark. Cross-legged. Blind. Humiliated.

But far from helpless. The witch might have proven her superiority in raw power, but he was sure he had her beat in guile. And ambition – the unconditional will to win at any cost. And resources. Either openly or behind the closed doors of hidden smoke filled rooms, whether they knew it or not, every government, every army, every police force, every low level bureaucrat on earth answered directly or indirectly to him. His influence was everywhere. He pulled every string.

He knew now that he was powerless to destroy *the woman* in a face to face confrontation. But those for whom she showed concern – Nelly and John Harper, the mechanic and his "Remnant." These were just people, and people could be killed. People could be used. People could be turned...

In his mind's eye he envisioned little Nelly seduced into his service, beguiled by all the pretty things he could give her, the exotic places he could show her, the unlimited power he could promise to share if only she'd be his. He saw her choosing him – choosing her *self*. He saw her rejecting *the woman*, joining him in the

battle to secure the world for all eternity from unreason, ruling that world by his side...

Oh, how that would make the witch suffer. No, he couldn't destroy *the woman*. But he could make her wish he had. He could twist and torture everyone she loves. He could rid the world of everything that brings her joy. And if he controlled *the seed*, she would have no choice but to endure that suffering, for as long as he cared to inflict it...

It was time to clear a path between himself and Nelly Harper. It was time for John Harper to die.

\* \* \* \*

It had been two long hours since the dismissal bell rang, and Marion Rankin was still at his desk. He wasn't bothering to look busy. His briefcase lay open before him on the desk, the secret phone exposed, and he just stared at the little device, waiting for it to spring to life and prove all his fears wrong. It was all he could think to do.

The phone rang, and he scooped it up.

"Mr. President..."

"John Harper is almost to your house. He plans to kill you and destroy everything you own."

"I'm still at school."

"Then get home. Kill him before he kills you. Before he kills your mother."

The mention of danger to his mother should have triggered a powerful reaction in him, and even he was surprised when it did not.

"Mr. President, we need to talk."

"Harper is literally blocks from your house. If you do not move now, you'll miss him."

"About reward. About compensation. I did not... Paul and I have not served you all these years without expectation of reward. We have done exactly as you asked. We found and delivered *the seed*. We want... We *expect* to be rewarded."

His arrogance in making demands of the President of the United States was met by a long silence. Then:

"Very well, Principal. I require of you one final task. Kill John Harper. If you fail, you forfeit your own life, and that of your son. If you succeed, I will give you anything you desire. Hear me, Principal, *anything you desire*. No limits."

"And Paul, too."

"How *selfless* of you, Principal."

"And Paul, too. Take it or leave it."

"Done."

Marion Rankin ended the call, and closed his briefcase.

*Anything he desired.* That was more like it. It was advantageous, then, that John Harper had escaped the fire at the salvage yard. His death that night would have carried no reward of its own. Now it was going to pay off in spades.

He snatched his jacket from the back of the chair and darted for the parking lot.



## Chapter Twenty-Seven: Consequences

When Neil and Billy dropped John Harper across the street from Rankin Mansion, sorrow churned like stale vinegar in his stomach. Some part of him was sure he would never see any of them again.

He kissed Nelly and reassured her with a smile. *Trust Mr. Coleman. He'll take good care of you – till I catch up. In a day or two at most.*

The van pulled away.

Rankin Mansion stood at the center of the estate. Though he was directly across the street, there was a lot of rolling green yard between the garage and where he stood. He would have to make his way in the open, across all that grass, not only to the garage, but around and behind it in hopes the back door he'd entered through that morning would still be unlocked. He crouched behind a parked car and plotted a route in his mind.

He checked his watch – 5:34 PM – then stood and readied himself to make a mad dash. He quickly dropped back into hiding, though, as a black Lincoln Town Car squealed around the corner, fired down the long Rankin Mansion driveway, then skidded to a stop in front of the garage, near the house. The garage door rose, but the car did not move. Instead, the driver's door opened, and Marion Rankin stepped out

onto the pavement. Metal glinted in his right hand, and though it could have been anything, seen from a distance, John's gut told him Marion had a gun.

*But why?*

The principal stepped inside the garage, then returned quickly to his car. Of course, he wouldn't be able to park in the first bay; John's makeshift bomb occupied most of that space.

The Lincoln backed up the driveway and idled while the first garage door dropped back into place. The middle bay door rose, and the long, black car disappeared inside. The door closed behind it.

John stood again, this time thinking hard about that gun in Marion's hand, and what might happen if he was seen entering the garage, or heard dragging fertilizer bags and gas cans back to their places on the shelves.

He was still recalibrating when a tan Toyota appeared around the corner – Paul Rankin. The tiny car shot down the driveway, and pulled to a stop directly in front of the third garage bay door, as if it were the customary spot the youth minister always parked when visiting his dad.

The door rose. The Toyota disappeared inside. The door began to close.

And John Harper was in motion.

*"Shit! Paul! Stop! Stop!"*

He fired across the street, leaped the low brick wall that circled the property, hit the grass running – then threw himself to the ground.

The garage door was closed. There was nothing he could do. He covered his head.

*Boom!*

Bay one of the three bay garage was gone. A hole the approximate height and width of that bay had appeared in the side of the mansion – revealing inside the house, flame, orange, yellow, everywhere.

"Paul! Get out!"

And then a second and a third explosion as the gas tanks of the vehicles inside the garage filled with flame.

John was on his feet, running hard. Paul was done for. But he might still save Marion Rankin. He could rescue the old woman. He had to try.

\* \* \* \*

From the back of his limo, tracing I-49 toward the airport where Air Force One waited to return him to

DC, President Michael Oglesby saw it all. He saw the mansion burning, Paul Rankin struggling to release a serpentine seatbelt, igniting with his car. He saw John Harper running – not away from the catastrophe like any sane man would run, but toward the house and the fire that consumed it, just like the fool he had always been...

Michael Oglesby had possessed psychic sight for as long as he could remember, but now that his physical vision was gone, his mind's eye opened onto a broad, new vista, a universal view bordering on omniscience. In that magnified psychic space, the scene at Rankin Mansion unfolded as if he were there, heat pressing his face, his chest racked with agony as the rear of the little Toyota fired forward like a cannon through Paul Rankin's body...

And, inside the house, Marion Rankin, unconscious, in a heap on the floor. Tim Rankin, inside the walls, seething against the fire, holding back flames and splintered walls with his body, protecting his son.

And John Harper, entering the scene, checking Marion for life, collecting the gun.

Michael fired a bolt of rage and confusion and urgency into Tim Rankin's mind. *He'll kill Marion! Stop him!*

Tim released a slice of burning ceiling over John Harper's head that swung down and crashed in a shower of sparks to the floor, missing him by inches.

"Mr. Rankin! Wake up!"

Where the ceiling had fallen, new flames were taking life. John transferred the gun to his left hand, and wrapped his right around Marion Rankin's wrist. He pulled with all his strength and managed to drag the unconscious man several feet toward safety before the wrist came alive and pulled free of his grip. Marion Rankin was awake and standing before him.

"Good. Come on. We have to save your mother. Show me where she is."

*He'll kill Jessica!* And another salvo of fear and anger and need to destroy hit Tim Rankin, and flooded his mind, and the whole house resonated with a tremble of rage.

Marion Rankin eyed the gun in John's hand, then tilted his head, as if straining to hear someone speak. He spun to face the mansion's massive front door, which opened before him of its own volition.

"He's all yours, Dad," he said to the air. "Finish him."

He disappeared into the daylight.

John surveyed the open door, and the green grass beyond it, then turned to the stairway behind him. Flames licked the banister, but had not yet claimed the steps themselves.

"I know you can hear me," he shouted to the burning walls around him. "I'm here to help your wife. Marion's mother. I want to save her. You have to believe me."

A wide chunk of burning wall twisted free and flew at him across the room. A tall cabinet slid forward, then toppled toward him.

"Shit!"

He dodged both projectiles, but he had to move fast now – toward the open front door and certain escape, or up the blazing stairway. He returned the gun to his right hand and bolted up the stairs.

He hoped the mansion's second floor might be mostly smoke, but it was already flames, licking hard for the ceiling. The stairs turned, and he barreled on, sweat pouring into his eyes, fighting to reach Jessica Rankin before the third story floor could become glowing coals beneath his feet, while there might still be a solid staircase to run back down.

He topped the stairs.

"Jessica Rankin! Jessica Rankin!"

It was a mansion. There were doors everywhere.  
Which was hers?

The teardrop of bright, white light that appeared at the end of hallway did not surprise him, and he did not hesitate to react. He ran as hard and as fast toward the light as he could, and launched his body with all the force of his weight and the inertia of running into the door the light indicated. The doorframe splintered and the door flew wide.

Jessica Rankin lay sleeping on the bed. The walls around her crawled with snakes of orange flame that hissed and slithered and intertwined as they joined to consume expanding portions of the room. The carpet everywhere was burning. A wide, wooden ceiling beam glowed red with heat, and as he watched, it grew rhythmically brighter and hotter, like a coal being blown to life in a fireplace.

*He'll kill her, Tim! Stop him! Destroy him now!*

But rather than attack John Harper, Tim Rankin's presence coalesced around the bed, a swarm of closely-packed bees, a field of energy so densely focused that John caught a glowing, green hint of it even with his naked eyes. All the hairs of his body danced upright and pulled toward the scene. Jessica Rankin slept on inside the bubble, a fairytale queen encased in ice. The burning carpet drew lines of fire

all around the bed, but they stopped there. Nothing could harm her.

*I said, kill him!* Michael Oglesby fired a bolt of blind hatred into Tim Rankin's mind. *Do as I say! Kill him! Kill him now!*

The glowing beam broke free and spun a fiery arc toward the bed. It crashed against the field that was Tim Rankin and rolled to the floor. Jessica slept on.

"Let me take her," John Harper called from the hallway. "Let me get her out of the house."

The door slammed so forcefully in his face that he was thrown into the opposite wall, where he sank to the floor. The gun skittered away and he didn't go after it.

He threw himself against the door again. Nothing. He pounded against the wood.

"Come on!" he shouted. "She'll die in there! Let me save her! Please!"

The door didn't budge, and with his palms against its surface, he could feel the heat pressing back. Fire was claiming the room.

He pounded the door. "Please!"



And this time, when *the woman* appeared, it was as if her light swelled out from inside his own chest. Her glow, like liquid moonlight, flowed up to swirl around his head, then down to his feet in a single motion, and he was standing in a bubble of light. He could feel *the woman* with him, around him, inside him, loaning him her power. He touched the door, and though he could see it with his eyes, solid there before him, to his hand it was mist. He stepped through into the burning room.

Jessica Rankin floated impossibly at the center of a sea of flame. There was nothing in the room that was not burning now, except the bed itself, and a faintly green bubble surrounding it.

John Harper felt only *the woman's* cool touch against his skin as he made his way across the room. When he reached the bed, he stepped through Tim Rankin as easily as he had the closed door, and scooped Jessica into his arms. The glow protecting his body expanded to surround the unconscious woman. He carried her to the hallway.

Michael Oglesby sent a torrent of images raging through Tim Rankin's mind – John Harper raping and torturing Jessica, cutting her throat, going after Marion, Paul Rankin exploding in his car.

*Stop him! Kill him! What's wrong with you? Go!*

John had barely reached the second floor landing when Tim Rankin hit him hard from behind. The sleeping woman flew from his arms. His legs vanished beneath him. His forehead hit the banister, and he was rolling fast, head first, down the final flight of stairs. When he hit the burning front hallway floor, he managed to stay conscious, but he'd lost all feeling the whole length of body. He sensed his head was twisted in a direction it shouldn't be. The only part of him he could move was his eyes.

And before those eyes, Jessica Rankin floated gently down the stairs as if carried in a pair of invisible arms. She was awake now, and for the briefest of moments, their eyes met, before she turned away and buried her face in the comfort of a chest he could not see.

He couldn't tell if he was breathing. There was only heat and smoke, and the red of fire everywhere – and fading, golden daylight still shining through the open front door.

Jessica Rankin floated out of the house, into the safety of the yard.

The door closed behind her.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight: The Guardians

Neil, Billy and Nelly ditched the service van at Neil's salvage yard, and hit the open road in Billy's 2050 Ford Friendship, a family sedan so brown and boxy and non-descript that no self-respecting cop would even notice it on the highway, let alone be seen pulling it over. They slipped, unchallenged, out of Arkady, and by the time the moon had risen over the highway, they were already entering the next state.

It had been a while since Nelly had spoken. When they first started driving, she'd jabbered nervously, talking about everything and nothing, filling the back seat with the sound of her own voice. When she'd fallen silent, Neil at first thought she was asleep, the poor kid. But in the rear view mirror, he could see that her eyes were wide open. She was sitting with her hands in her lap, hunched slightly forward. Her eyes darted back and forth across the open palms of her hands as if a movie were playing there. He watched her expression change gradually from curiosity, to delight, to sorrow, to resolve.

"Nelly? You okay back there?"

Nelly shook both hands before her as if they stung, then swiveled up onto her knees. She leaned forward and stuck her head between the two front seats.

"Mr. Coleman," she said. Her tiny voice was matter of fact, like a TV lawyer warming up to cross examine a witness. "The first time you saw *the woman*, you were with my father."

"And Billy," Neil answered. "And a bunch of other kids. Third graders, mostly."

Nelly nodded. "*The woman* spoke that night, but Daddy couldn't hear what she said. You did, though." She looked at Billy. "You both did."

"Did your dad tell you that story?"

"No," Nelly said, simply. "*The woman* talks to me all the time now, and she told me to ask you about it."

The two men exchanged glances.

"Okay," Neil said. "Yes, it's true. *The woman* spoke to Billy, and I heard every word because she was talking to me, too. She called us to Hobo Camp that night to tell us something important."

"About me."

Neil paused.

"About the future, anyway. You hadn't been born yet. But yes, I now think she was probably talking about you."

"What did she say?"

"You don't know?"

"She told me to ask you. She says its important that I hear it from you."

"Okay, Nelly. Remember, I was nine years old at the time. Your age. She told me Billy and I would be friends forever, and that part's come true."

Billy gave the girl a thumb's up. Neil smiled and continued.

"And she said we'd grow up to be her warriors someday, like the Knights of the Round Table. She was going to entrust us with something very precious to protect at all cost. She showed us the Holy Grail, like in the King Arthur stories, because that was something we knew at the time. But even then, we figured she meant *the seed*."

"Am I *the seed*, Mr. Coleman?"

"I can't say for sure, Nelly. But you're close enough for me."

*Me, too*, Billy echoed.

"And we *will* protect you, Nelly. For the rest of our lives. With everything that we have."

All three of them suddenly had tears in their eyes.

"Will you be my father now, Mr. Coleman?" Nelly said.

"You have a father, baby. Your dad is our friend."

Nelly took three small breaths, shuddering more with each exhalation.

"Daddy's on his way to Mamma. *The woman* told me. He hasn't reached *the vision* yet, but he's on his way. The Good is helping him, so he's sure to make it..."

She sighed again, her voice cracking.

"But he's not here anymore, here with us in the regular world. You're all I have, Mr. Coleman."

There was so much to cry about in the girl's last words that Neil didn't know where to begin. John was dead. Nelly was orphaned. And this sweet, vulnerable little kid was at the center of prophecy, of supernatural events destined to rock the whole world. Her life was deeply tied to the greatest Good in all the universe. The greatest Evil in the world wanted her dead. And all she had to protect her were two small town mechanics – with good hearts, for sure, but would that be enough?

Well, they also had connections. The Remnant was out there, mostly small, secret pockets of Gooders

scattered all over the world. He'd once been at their center, with his salvage yard broadcasts. He knew where the spokes ran.

They were not alone.

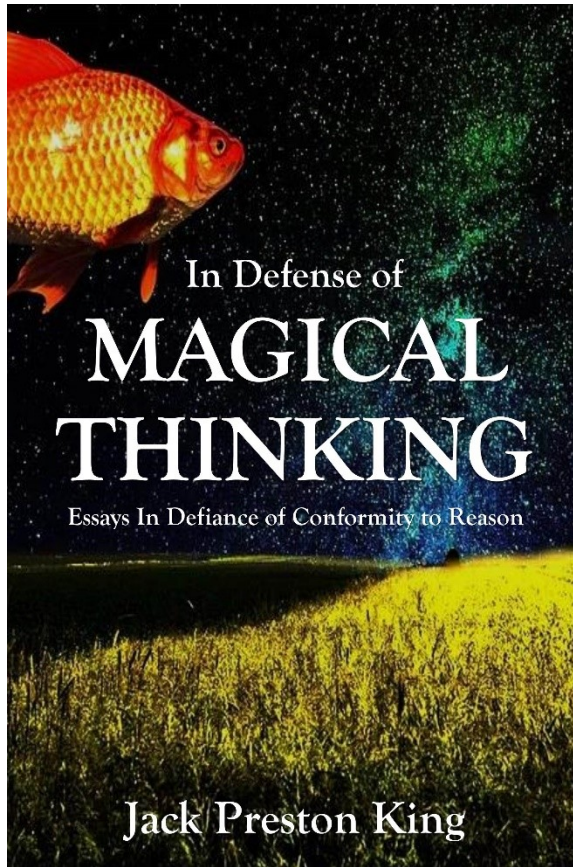
He rubbed Nelly's hair and smiled reassuringly.

"And we'll be all you ever need, from now on, Nelly. I promise."

She curled up in the back, then, and did finally fall asleep, while up front, her champions debated alternate routes to their first destination – not the closest spoke on the wheel of the Remnant, necessarily, but by far the one with the best local beer...

**Also By Jack Preston King**

**In Defense of Magical Thinking:  
Essays in Defiance of Conformity to Reason**



Do arrogant Twitter atheists make your blood boil?  
When Richard Dawkins, the Amazing Randi, or Bill  
Nye the Science Guy smugly tell you how stupid you  
are for believing in God, or psychic powers, or ghosts,



or the afterlife, or even your own immortal soul, do you want to just reach through the screen and strangle them?

You're going to love this book.

Jack Preston King is not an apologist for any one religion or spiritual path. He's a defender of the human spiritual impulse in all its forms. In these 16 rollicking essays, King makes the case for both the reality and importance of spiritual experience, citing Psychology, neuroscience, Taoism, Buddhism, Christianity, Philosophy, and even pop culture icons Philip K. Dick, the Face on Mars, and the 1980s console video game Frogger.

Read this book, and the next time some jerk on Twitter says magic isn't real, and human beings are soulless, chemically-driven animals inhabiting a dead, material universe, you'll be armed and ready to make your stand In Defense of Magical Thinking.

**Mythic Living: Thoughts on Everyday Life in  
Mythological Light**

# Mythic Living

Thoughts on Everyday Life  
in Mythological Light



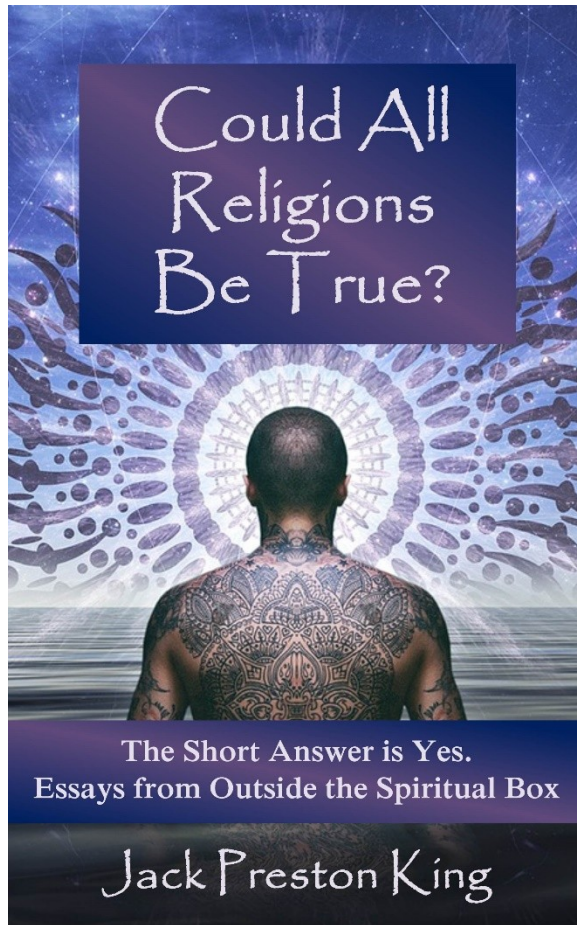
Jack Preston King

Are you pursuing your destiny, or surrendering to your fate (and how can you know the difference)? What stories do you tell yourself about yourself, and how do those stories impact your life? How does your past shape your future, and can you change it? Why is love so difficult, and what can you do about it? What if life really is a game, and the rules are hidden deep within you? Join Jack Preston King as he shines

a mythological light on everyday life questions like these, drawing inspiration from myths Greek and Sumerian, Christian and Gnostic, as ancient as the Big Bang, and as modern as Star Wars.

Includes a free, full-length preview of “Mythology is a Language. It’s How Our Souls Speak to Us,” from King’s book *Could All Religions Be True? The Short Answer is YES. Essays from Outside the Spiritual Box*.

**Could All Religions Be True? The Short Answer is YES. Essays from Outside the Spiritual Box.**



The Philosophical Problem of Religious Diversity, stated simply, is that the religions of the world contradict each other in important particulars, including, but not limited to, the existence of God, the nature of God, the number of gods, the role God or gods play in human affairs, and our destiny after death (Heaven? Hell? Purgatory? Reincarnation? Oblivion?). Religious believers typically solve the

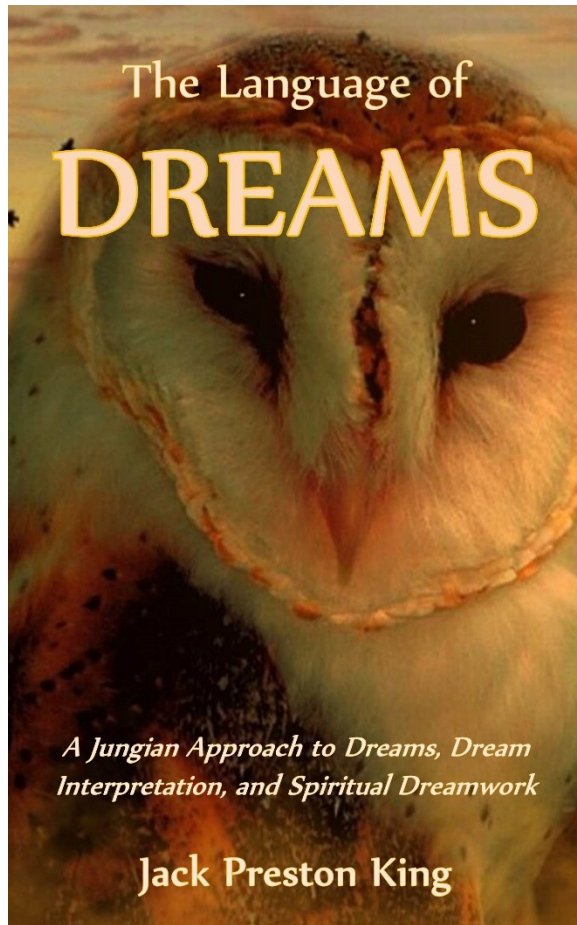
problem by embracing one religion and rejecting the rest. For atheists, the contradictions invalidate all religions equally.

But is there a third way? Could all religions be true? What if followers of just one religion and atheists who reject all religions are both wrong? Are there ways to think about reality in which diverse religious beliefs, even in their conflicting particulars, could all be simultaneously true?

So far, Jack Preston King has found four. In *Could All Religions Be True?*, King explores those theories in depth, then takes the reader on a rollicking journey outside the spiritual box, forging new and enlightening paths through religion, spirituality, the soul, the afterlife, mythology, out of body experiences, even Goddess worship and Jungian Psychology.

Could all religions be true? The short answer is YES!

**The Language of Dreams:  
A Jungian Approach to Dreams, Dream  
Interpretation, and Spiritual Dreamwork**



Dreams are more than random neural firings in your brain. They're a language. The entity sending you nightly messages in this nonverbal, symbolic dream language is your own unconscious mind. All dreams, even the scary or disturbing ones, have your best interest at heart. They're messages from you to you.

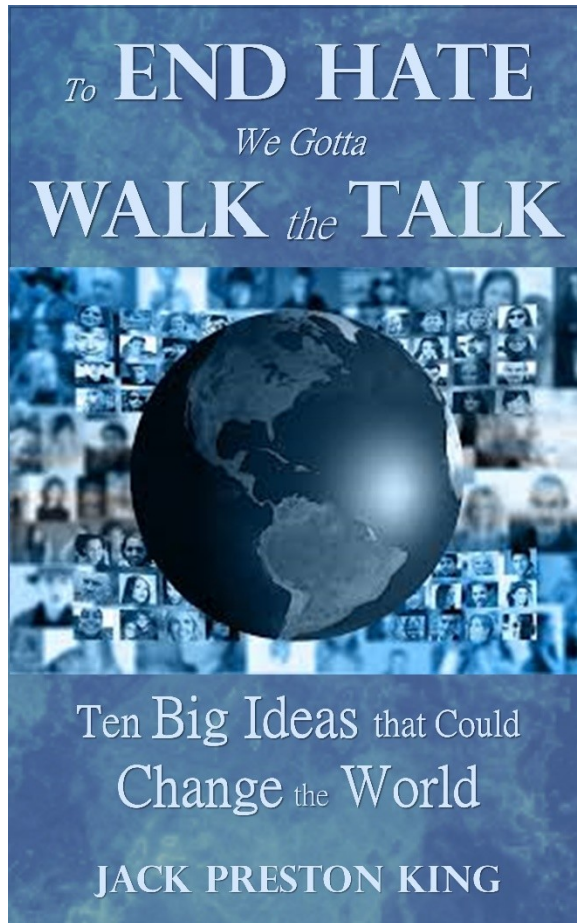
The "dream maker" is you, your unconscious mind, which speaks in images. The intended recipient of the

dream message is also you, your conscious mind, which uses words. Interpreting dreams, then, is mostly a matter of translation.

The more you work with your dreams, the easier interpretation gets. Yes, you have to learn the language of imagery in which your personal “dream maker” speaks, and that takes effort. But over time, that language will sink in and become natural to you, the way someone studying French or Spanish eventually stops needing to look up every word or phrase. Eventually, they simply speak the language.

And, with practice interpreting your dreams, so will you.

**To End Hate We Gotta Walk the Talk - Ten Big  
Ideas that Could Change the World**



We can end hate. We can transform global culture.  
We can change the world.

To accomplish Big Goals like these, we'll need Big  
Ideas to inspire us.

Here are ten of mine:

1. Be a cultural revolutionary, not just a political one.



2. Wage Peace (don't just fight a war against war).
3. Have the right kind of courage.
4. Walk the talk (live your values, don't just talk about them).
5. Learn to love (not just tolerate) people who don't look, think or act like you.
6. Stop projecting your fears, faults and failures (especially onto People of Color).
7. Demand a world that works for everybody (know the ten nonnegotiables).
8. Choose everyone's happiness, not just your own.
9. Be the kind of person who saves the world.
10. Learn how your brain shapes reality — then use that knowledge to reshape reality!

If you think any of these Big Ideas are pie-in-the-sky nonsense, you're wrong.

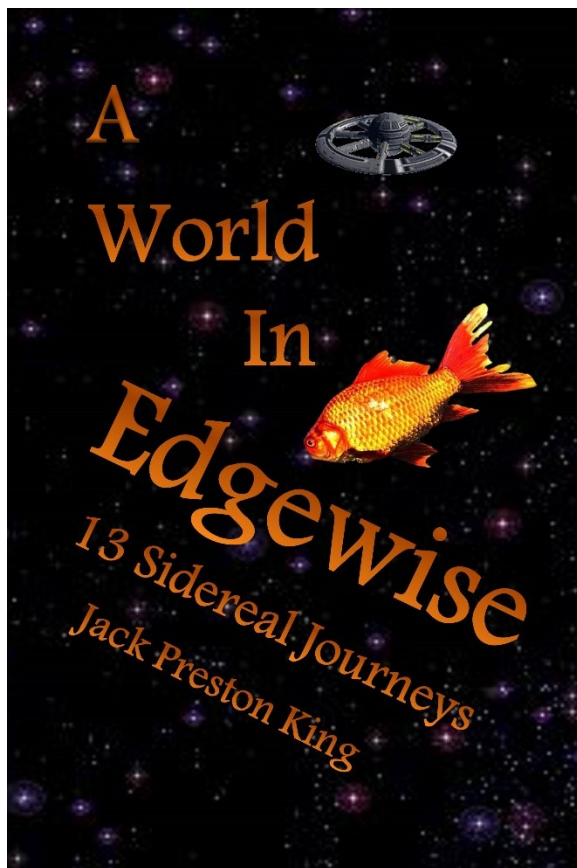
Read this book. Learn the truth. Be inspired.

Then get busy ending hate, transforming global culture, and changing the world.

The future is in your hands!

**Fiction, Poetry, and More by Jack Preston  
King**

**A World In Edgewise: Thirteen Sidereal Journeys**



*A man's guilt becomes a doorway to a hidden realm...*

*A virtual model seduces the world...*

*A damned soul flees Dante's Inferno, with an evil Archangel in hot pursuit...*

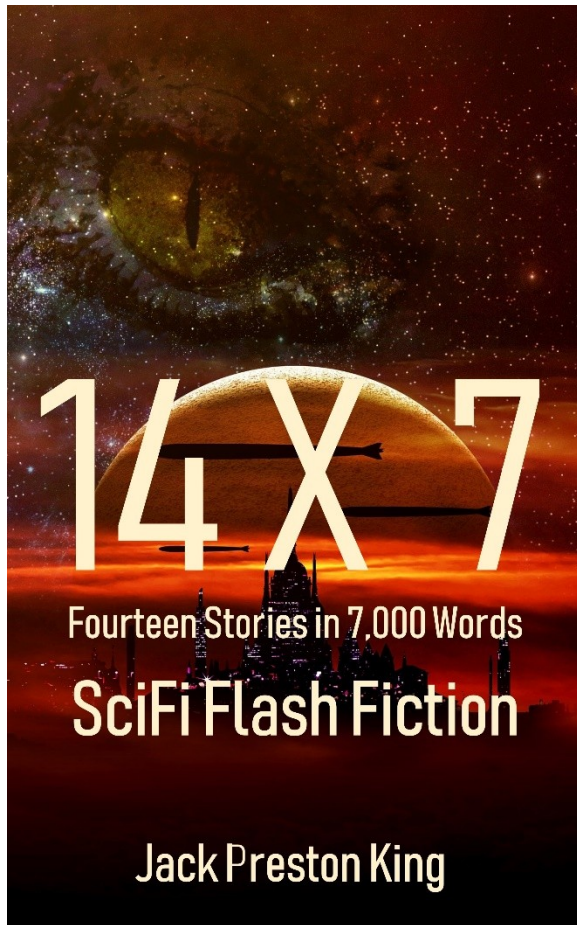
*A man finds almost everyone on Earth is an alien in disguise...*

*A young housewife discovers her latent superpowers...*

Discover *A World In Edgewise*, where these sidereal journeys – and many more – await!

*"The stories in Jack Preston King's A World In Edgewise: 13 Sidereal Journeys alternately disturb me, haunt me, make me think, and send sinfully titillating tingles of delight running up and down my spine, often delivering all of these sensations at once." – Vincent Casspiano, Jr., author of The Simplest Path to Personal and Planetary Awakening: FREE YOUR MIND*

**14 X 7: Fourteen Stories in 7,000 Words – SciFi  
Flash Fiction**



*Is the Moon alive?*

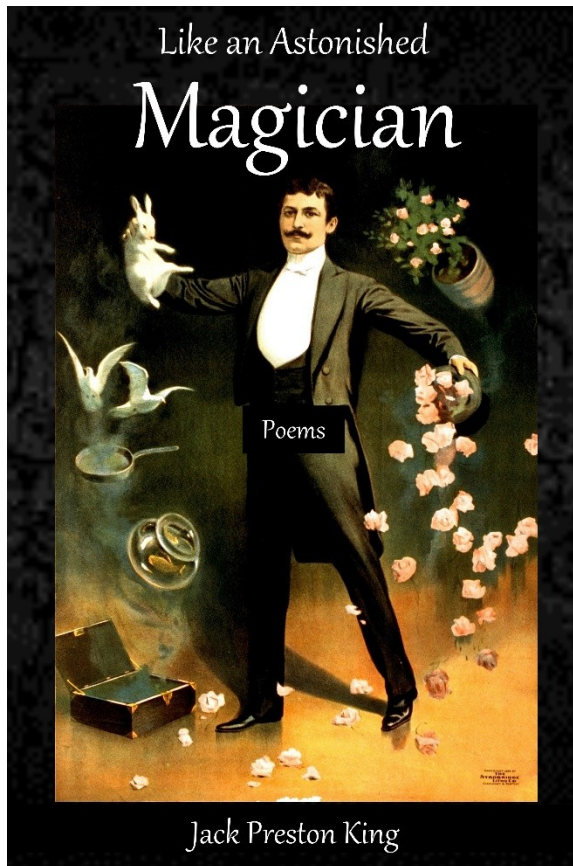
*Are Reptilians secretly living among us?*

*Could aliens be angels?*

*Can love change the past?*

The answers to these question – and many more! – await in 14 X 7: Fourteen Stories in 7,000 words - SciFi Flash Fiction. Here's proof that good things come in small packages!

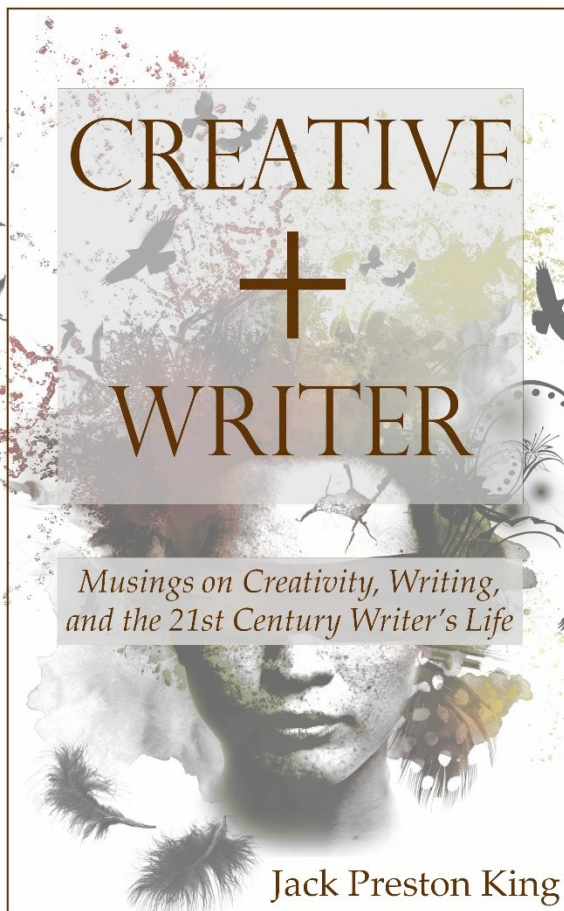
### Like an Astonished Magician: Poems



From the pleasures of mature love (*While ember kisses/stirred between two lifetimes twined in love/and years, those romance doesn't know about*), to Yeats-

inspired Celtic witchery, to visions of angels, flying saucers, and meeting yourself in a dream, *Like an Astonished Magician* is a no-downer, zero-navel-gazing poetic celebration of love, life, the imagination, and, of course, magic.

**Creative + Writer: Musings on Creativity, Writing,  
and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Writer's Life**



What's the difference between imagination and creativity? Are artists creative, or are they just troublemakers? Are you sabotaging your own creativity? Is blogging worthy of your creative talent?

Follow Jack Preston King as he takes an informative and deeply personal dive into these questions and more. Discover the natural cycle of inspiration (when you fight it, you lose); learn the proper care and feeding of your muse; take your brain to the next level of creativity; explore the perils of pseudonyms, why people buy books, the dangers of blogging, and one joyous solution to the Art VS Money dilemma that plagues most successful creatives.

Not just for writers, *Creative + Writer* is a book of insight and inspiration for every artist who longs to more successfully court their personal, creative muse.

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